A Thesis

entitled

Nontraditional Adult Women Experiences with the Institutional Services and Support Systems at the University of Toledo

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Education Degree in Higher Education

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An Abstract of

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The U.S higher education demographic has changed, and adult women constitute the fastest-growing segment in the higher learning environment. Increasingly, many institutions of higher education have come to recognize the important role of student services and support systems in the lives of adult women learners. Although much effort exists in creating supportive learning environments for adult women students, educators and higher education practitioners still know very little of these students’ experiences with institutional support and student services, what services are beneficial to them and why. The purpose of this study is to enhance our knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences with the student services and support systems. An additional purpose of this study is to explore the types of institutional student services and support systems that are found useful and beneficial by these undergraduate women learners themselves and why they are found useful, as well as to explore the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women learners regarding institutional support systems that they deem unavailable but necessary.
A qualitative research method was employed in this study. The participants in this study were nontraditional undergraduate adult women students enrolled at The University of Toledo (UT). The research design used was a semi-structured open-ended interview questionnaire. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the data generated from the interviews were analyzed. The data analysis provided insight into adult women’s experiences with the institutional support services in higher education, and captured adult women students’ thoughts on the ways they used and benefited from the available academic support, student activities, and campus facilities. The data analysis also provided insight into the adult women students’ challenges, needs, and expectations pertaining to their academic journey for success. The results from this study enhance our knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences with the institutional support services that effectively support their achievement and academic goal.
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Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements v

Table of Contents vi

I. Overview of the study 1

   Introduction 1

   Problem Statement 2

   Purpose of the Study 3

   Research Questions 4

   Significance of Research 5

   Limitations 5

   Delimitations 6

   Assumptions 6

   Definition of Terms 7

   Summary 8

II. Literature Review 10

   Nontraditional Adult Students 13

      Defining Nontraditional Adult Students 13

      Challenge and Risk Factors 15

      Adult Learning Style 17

   The New Norm Nontraditional Adult Women 21

      Motives for Return to Learning 22

      Barriers Women Face in College 24
New Directions for the Institutions of Higher Education 26
  Principles of Support for Adult Learners 26
  Academic Support Services 29
  Campus Activities and Programming 30
  Campus Facilities 31

The Guiding Theoretical Framework 32

III. Methodology 37
  Purpose of Study 37
  Research Questions 37
  Research Method 38
  Instrument 39
  Research Settings and Participants 41
  Field Procedures 43
  Data Analysis 44
  Research Validation 45
  Summary 45

IV. Findings 46
  Demographics of the Participants 46
  Background of the Participants 47
  Category One: The institutional Support Services 49
    Academic Supports 49
    Campus Activities and Programming 50
    Campus Facilities 50
Chapter One

Overview of the Study

Introduction

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008), since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the demographic of who attends college in the United States (U.S.) has changed dramatically. The majority of students are more likely to be women. Women constituted 57% of the 17.5 million undergraduate students enrolled in 2005, up from 56% of 14.3 million students in 1995 (Synder, Dillow & Hoffman, 2008). Furthermore, current projections by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggest that between 2005 and 2016, the college enrollment will rise to 20.4 million and that almost 60% of the students will be women (Hussar and Bailey, 2007). Adding to this current projection, by 2015, there will be an additional 21% increase of women students older than 25 years of age attending college (Hussar and Bailey, 2007).

The face of higher education is changing, where the typical college student is no longer the traditional student aged 18 to 25 years old who is living on campus. According to Mbilinyi (2006), “only 16 % of those pursuing higher education in United States now fit that mold” (p. 2). Indeed, the U.S. higher education demographic has shifted, and adult women constitute the fastest-growing segment in the higher learning environment. Increasingly, many institutions of higher education have come to recognize the important role of student services and support systems in the lives of adult women learners. Support initiatives have been developed throughout the different institutional divisions. In
addition, women’s centers and colleges for adult learners have appeared on campuses throughout the nation to assist adult women to enter or reenter college. Adult women students have unique needs: they often work full-time or part-time, are married or single with children, and often care for the elderly in their families while attending school (Nitri, 2001, p. 135). Serving the needs of nontraditional adult students in higher education has become an important priority for higher education institutions (Rice, 2003).

Although much effort exists in creating supportive learning environments for the adult women students, educators and higher education practitioners still know very little of these students’ experiences with institutional support and student services, what services are beneficial to them and why. Chapter One focuses on the problem of this study, its background, its purpose, and its significance. Next, the chapter discusses the limitations, delimitation, and assumptions of the study followed by a list of terminology utilized throughout the thesis.

Problem Statement

Most of the adult women as learners are identified as nontraditional adult students. According to the NCES, these students typically have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, work full-time while enrolled, and/or have dependents other than a spouse and children (2002). By using one or a combination of these criteria, NCES estimates that over 60% of students in U.S. higher education can be characterized as nontraditional students (NCES, 2002). Often, the majority of nontraditional students are women, and as NCES reported, 44% percent of students are 25 years old or older (2002). Adult women returning to learning find a nontraditional method more convenient to balance responsibilities of multiple roles such as working full-time or part-time, taking
care of their children and family, and maintaining the traditional role of homemakers. As traditional homemakers, adult women have been expected to do the majority of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, and managing all household duties (Tian, 1996).

There is a significant amount of literature available on nontraditional adult women as lifelong learners, their unique needs and characteristics, and the available student services and support systems offered by institutions of higher education to these learners. However, we know very little of how nontraditional undergraduate adult women experience institutional support and student services, what services are beneficial to them and why. Moreover, the types of support systems that are needed but not available to them are yet another gray area. Finally, a very limited amount of research has focused on addressing these questions from the perspective of the adult female learners themselves.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to enhance our knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences with the institutional student services and support systems offered by the higher education institutions. An additional purpose of this study is to explore the types of institutional student services and support systems that are found useful and beneficial by these women learners themselves and why, as well as the needs and expectations of adult women learners regarding institutional support systems that may not be available but are needed.

Many higher education institutions have struggled to adapt to the changing student demographic of nontraditional adult women. Because adult women students mainly participate in evening classes, online programs, or associate mostly with the women center programs, they have been practically invisible to student services and
campus activities. It was often assumed that student services did not have effective practices in serving this group of women students (Fairchild, 2003). By simply offering institutional support services, various programs and activities do not foster student success. Programs and activities must be tailored to the specific students whom higher education practitioners intend to reach. With this in mind, looking at the unique characteristics and needs of nontraditional adult women in higher education, the barriers for them, and the multiple roles these women play in society will enhance higher education practitioners’ understanding in regard to this student population. In addition, this effort will help the higher education practitioners establish institutional supports services and activities that are necessary and effective in addressing the educational needs of nontraditional undergraduate adult women students.

**Research Questions**

The research question that guided the study was: How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institutional support systems and services. There were several sub questions to this research question:

- How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s academic support services?

- How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s campus activities and programming?

- How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s facilities and buildings?
Significance of Research

The study on nontraditional undergraduate adult women students will be a significant endeavor in promoting good practice for the researchers, and higher education practitioners. First, the study will help researchers understand better nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences and needs of institutional support systems and services offered in three areas of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities. With this understanding, researchers can better identify the benefit of these institutional systems and services that support nontraditional undergraduate adult students’ academic success.

Second, the insights from this study have the potential to create awareness among higher education practitioners and policy makers about nontraditional adult women’s needs and expectations while enrolled in the institution of higher education. Thus, the study findings can help the higher education institutions’ practitioners and policy makers identify new models or effective practices in serving the nontraditional adult women students.

Limitations

There are two limitations to this study. The first limitation is related to the researcher’s personal and professional bias as a nontraditional adult woman student. As an adult woman and the University of Toledo’s Eberly Center of Women’s user, the researcher’s own subjectivity might influence her interpretation of what she hears from the other participants. The second limitation is related to the qualitative method of research in that the study is bounded by a specific context or setting. A qualitative method of research is constrained within the specific setting, which in this case the
University of Toledo (UT) and several participants of its undergraduate adult women students. Most of the nontraditional undergraduate adult student participants in this study are frequent visitors or facility users of the Eberly Center of Women (ECW) at UT. Two of them are alumni members of the “Return to Learning” program offered by the ECW, while four of them are from the College of Adult and Lifelong Learning (CALL) at UT.

**Delimitations**

The study was delimited to nine nontraditional adult women students who were currently enrolled as undergraduate students at one higher education institution-the University of Toledo (UT). The researchers chose these nine students due to her involvement in the Eberly Center of Women and her practicum with the College of Adult and Lifelong Learning. Both of these experiences gave the researcher the opportunity to meet these women learners. Thus, accessibility to the learners and established relationship were the main reasons for this delimitation.

**Assumptions**

By conducting this research study, the researcher assumed the adult women students take into account the institutional support services of their higher education institution when making their choice of institution. The researcher also assumed that the higher education institution does offer student services that cater to nontraditional adult students, especially adult women students. Also, it was assumed that the nontraditional adult women considered using or benefiting from the student services and support systems provided and that the experience of using the institution’s student services and support systems has influenced the nontraditional adult women’s learning outcomes.
Definition of Terms

*Academic support.* Academic support consists of services that enhance and help students’ academic advancement. This includes academic support services such as advising, mentoring, tutoring, writing assistant and tutor, academic workshops and lectures.

*Undergraduate adult woman student.* An adult female aged 25 years old and older, mature, a learner and going to school. The terms undergraduate adult women student, adult women student, adult women learner are used interchangeably throughout the study.

*Campus activities and programs.* Campus activities and programs promote student involvement and engagement. In the life of the institution this includes activities for student organizations, Greek life, athletic events and social activities such as attending concerts.

*Lifelong learners.* Alternately referred to as the returning students, the older or mature students. The term refers to represents college seekers who decided to attend college part-time after having delayed going to college, or adult students who reentered the higher education system after leaving college for many years.

*Nontraditional student.* For the purpose of the study, nontraditional student is defined as someone who is 25 years of age and older, attends college full-time or part-time, has delayed initial college enrollment, has earned some college credits, is financially self-supporting, works full-time while enrolled, and has dependents. The terms nontraditional students, adult students, or adult learners are used interchangeably throughout the study.
Institutional facilities or supports. This area includes the institutional facilities such as auxiliary services, bookstores, computer labs, transit busses, libraries, and many more.

Student services. Services that assist the student with financial aid, admission, registration, orientation, official transcript, degree audit report, graduation application and many more not related to academic support or campus activities.

Summary

This study follows the standard format of a thesis. Chapter One focuses on the problem of this study, its background, its purpose, and its significance. Many adult students are identified as undergraduate nontraditional students. The majority of the nontraditional students are women and we know very little of how nontraditional adult women experience institutional support and student services, and what services are beneficial to them. The purpose of this study is to enhance our knowledge of nontraditional adult women students’ experiences with the institutional student services and support systems offered by the higher education institutions. The study on nontraditional adult women students will be a significant endeavor in promoting good practice for the researchers, and higher education practitioners. This chapter also discusses the limitations, delimitation, and assumptions of the study, and introduces a list of terminology utilized throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two of the literature reviews the nontraditional adult learners, summarizing existing definitions, and discussing the challenges and risk factors adult students face, followed by the adult learning styles that work best for them. The second section of Chapter Two centers on adult women students. In this section, the literature
provides an overview of the definition of nontraditional adult women, the motives behind their decision to return to higher education, and the barriers adult women face in a college environment. The third section of the literature review explores the institutional services in the areas of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities geared towards adult learners in general, and adult women in particular. Finally, the literature explores several research studies that offer a theoretical framework pertaining to the nontraditional adult women students that guides this study.

Chapter Three focuses on the methods and procedures used to conduct the research, including the research questions, the instrument used to collect the information, and data analysis. The fourth chapter reports on results of the findings. Finally, the fifth and final chapter provides a discussion of the implications of the study and recommendations to enhance higher education practitioners’ understanding of on nontraditional adult women students’ experiences and needs in higher education institutions.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This review of literature is divided into three sections. In the first section, the literature review defines the nontraditional adult learners, summarizing existing definitions, discussing the challenges and risk factors adult students face, and the learning styles that work best for them. The second section centers on adult women students. In this section, the literature review provides the definition of nontraditional adult women, the motives behind their decision to return to higher education, and the barriers adult women face in a college environment. The third section explores institutional support in the areas of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities geared towards adult women in particular. Finally, the literature review identifies two major categories that guide the collection of information in the study. The first category refers to the adult women’s experiences with the institutional support services of colleges and universities. The second category focuses on the challenges, needs and expectations of adult women students pertaining to their academic journey for success.

Over the past thirty years, the number of adult students has increased dramatically in American higher education (National Center for Education, 2009). In addition; adult women now make up a majority of college students in the U.S. higher education environment. According to Mbilinyi (2006), 49% of adult women versus 47% of adult men are more likely to have returned to school after the age of 25 years (p.15). Adult students are often referred to as nontraditional students; yet not all nontraditional students
are adult students. For the purpose of this study, the term “nontraditional student” aligns with the definition of nontraditional students of the National Center for Education (NCES). According to NCES (2002), nontraditional students are those who are 25 years old and older, often attend college full-time or part-time, have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, are financially independent of parents, work full-time while enrolled, and have dependents other than a spouse (p. 1). By using one or a combination of these criteria, NCES estimates that over 60% of all students in U.S. higher education can be characterized as nontraditional students (NCES, 2002).

Research shows that high levels of student engagement with a wide range of student services effectively promote student success and increase academic achievement (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). In other words, students learn most effectively in supportive campus environments. Supportive campus environments provide programs, services, and resources to students who need them, when they need them, such as affirming transition programs, advising networks, peers support, and services tailored for students’ special needs to create conditions that encourage for academic and social success. The irony is that nontraditional students are at greater risks of not completing courses and their degrees even in high quality supportive learning environments (Cross, 1981). Cross (1981) suggests that adults typically struggle to balance their academic needs, work, and family responsibilities (p. 34). Moreover, nontraditional adult students often lack resources and generally must adapt to a learning environment designed to serve young, traditional, full-time students.

Nontraditional adult students often face unique challenges and require support in their journey of learning. Many higher education institutions have come to recognize the
important roles of academic student services, student activities, and support systems in the lives of nontraditional adult students. According to Baxter Magolda (2009), “many student affairs practitioners are committed in supporting student success, outcomes, and learning” of adult students (p. 621). Higher education practitioners can intentionally create the conditions to enhance nontraditional adult student learning and academic success. Different types of campus divisions of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities do offer services geared towards nontraditional students. However, there is a limited understanding of how nontraditional adult students in general and adult women in particular use the available student services or support systems, and what services are beneficial to them. Therefore, enhancing understanding of the experiences, needs, and expectations of nontraditional adult women students with the institutions will assists higher education institutions in creating a positive learning environment in serving this growing population.
Part I: Nontraditional Adult Students

The stereotyped images of college students who are 18 to 24 years old, attend full-time, and live in residential halls is being challenged by a new reality of college students (CAEL, 2000). The face of higher education has been changing as more and more adult students have entered or reentered college (Hardin, 2008). NCES (2009) reports that since 1971, the percentage of adult students enrolled in undergraduate studies increased from 28% to 43%, which is an increase in numbers from 2.4 million to an estimated 6.7 million. Currently, 73% of all college students are in some way nontraditional students (NCES, 2009).

**Defining nontraditional adult students.**

The definition of nontraditional student varies according to different sources. Bean and Metzner (1985) define the “traditional student as residing on campus, age 18 to 24 years old, and attending college full time” (p. 488). In light of this definition, nontraditional adult students would be those “who lack one or more of these characteristics” (p. 488).

Yet a variety of definitions exists which suggests that it is very difficult to develop a typical profile or definition of nontraditional adult students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines the nontraditional student as one who “delays enrollment after he or she finished high school; attends school part-time; works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; is financially independent with dependents other than a spouse; and is a single parent or does not have a high school diploma” (2009, p. 2). The American Association of University Women (AAUW) suggests that nontraditional students may include those who are older, have parenting
status, work, or attend college part-time (AAUW, 2009). Also, Bean and Metzner (1985) stated that nontraditional students can be defined as commuter students of 25 years old and older (p. 488). Commuter students do not live in a college residence and must commute to college.

Cross (1981) defines the nontraditional student as an adult who is new or is returning to postsecondary education while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, caring for the elderly and other dependents (p. 32). In addition, nontraditional students are all facing one or more transitions in their personal or career lives. These transitions in life can be viewed as positive or negative experience. For example, some nontraditional adults enroll in higher education as they are preparing for a new career, job advancement, or simply want to learn new skills, or preparing for retirement. Such transitions can be viewed as positive life transitions. For others, the transition can come as a result of a negative life experience (Hardin, 2008). The motivation to enroll in college can be viewed as a negative experience when the individuals are facing downsizing of their jobs. In addition, a personal life transition such as divorce or the loss of a spouse often forces adult students to enter postsecondary education in hopes to maintain or improve their life situations (Hardin, 2008).

Based on the different definitions of nontraditional adult students, four factors emerge as central to the concept – age, living arrangements, financial status, and enrollment status. For the purpose of the study, the researcher defines the nontraditional adult student as anyone who has one or more of the following characteristics: is 25 years old or older, attends college full-time or part-time, has delayed initial college enrollment,
has earned some college credits, is financially self-supporting, works full time while enrolled, and has dependents.

**Challenges and risk factors.**

In some respects, the personal and socio-economic challenges adult learners face in their academic journey is considered as characteristics defining the adult learners. The characteristics which distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students include juggling the demands of family and children, having financial responsibilities, facing the lack of support of an age cohort, encountering limited social acceptability or support for their student status. In addition, the majority of nontraditional adult students between the ages of 25 and 64 years were found in the lower income quartiles, compared to traditional students between 18 and 24 years (Levin, 2007). Moreover, compared to nontraditional male students, nontraditional women students often face a greater number of negative psychological consequences and emotional conflicts that can affect their overall educational experience (Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Depending on the set of challenges nontraditional adult students encounter, scholars have attempted to estimate the level of risks they face. One such useful classification can be found in the continuum of adult and nontraditional learners “risk factors” developed by Levin (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milan & Turner, 2007). The four categories are labeled: minimal risk, moderate risk, high risk, and ultra-high risk.

The adult learners whose risk of failure is minimal are the ones who have an “identity as an underrepresented minority or delayed college enrollment” (Pusser et al., 2007, p.6). Low risk adult students, according to Levin, generally exhibit this particular
characteristic because many of them are first-generation college students (Pusser et al., 2007).

The nontraditional adult students placed in the moderate risk category exhibit two or three characteristics, such as first-generation status, part-time enrollment, or lower socioeconomic standing. Moreover, moderate risk nontraditional adult students also identify themselves as re-entry students who need financial aid (Pusser et al., 2007).

Based on Levin’s stratified risk factors, a nontraditional adult student at high risk of failure exhibits many characteristics in addition to the low risk and moderate risk categories. Adding to the factors mentioned above, these nontraditional adult students also play a role as a single parent and have an employment status of more than 20 hours a week (Pusser et al., 2007).

Lastly, the highest-risk category, or the ultra-high risk nontraditional adult students, includes students with many characteristics, who often “exist on the periphery of higher education” (Pusser et al., 2007, p.5). Many higher education institutions categorize these learners as invisible in the formal accounting of students’ enrollment because they tend to drop in and out of the program or earn so few credits that they do not fit in institutional enrollment standards. High-risk adult learners are those individuals who face many challenges but are determined to participate in higher education. However, the determination does not always serve them well. Many of them tend to enroll in nontraditional programs such as non-credit course sequences including non-certificate or externally certified programs that do not carry over into baccalaureate degree programs (Pusser et al., 2007).
Adult learning styles.

Over the past several decades, the traditional beliefs that adults had passed their window of opportunity in learning new information as effectively as those of the younger generations has been challenged (Knowles, 1973). The influx of adult learners in higher education has increasingly stimulated research on adult learning styles and efforts to create conducive learning environments for adult learners.

As one of the first scholars to recognize the differences in adult learning needs and learning processes, Malcolm Knowles (1973) believed that adults learn differently than younger generations of traditional students. His Adult Learning Principles theory was based on four assumptions about the development of adult learning (Knowles, 1973). The first assumption focuses on the adults’ preferences for self-direction. According to this assumption, adult learners prefer to be directly involved in their own learning process, and tend to name their own needs and to participate in the acquisition of knowledge (Knowles, 1973). In the traditional learning environment, students prefer that an instructor dictates what content will be taught. However, adult learners do not expect their instructors to spoon-feed them the information. The second assumption in Knowles’ theory states that adults’ past experiences affect how they filter new information. The continuous validation of the credibility of information or knowledge based on past experience is an approach that helps the adult learners retains the information. For this reason, case studies and problem-solving exercises and activities are pedagogical techniques that are meaningful for adult learners.

Adults are aware of their own learning needs. That is the third assumption in Knowles’ theory. Adults determine what they want and need to learn by past experience,
both professional and personal. Many adults enrolled in higher education as a result of specific labor market demands; they pursue coursework that serves the immediate purpose of job training, license examinations, job skills upgrading, retraining for new occupations, or preparing for work in a particular industry (Pusser et al., 2007). The majority of adult students most likely has some foundational knowledge or prefers designing their educational programs. Finally, the fourth assumption in Knowles’ theory sees adults as competency-based learners, which means that adults prefer learning a subject or following coursework that can be practically applied, either on their job or in their personal lives. Hence, theoretically- or subject-based learning is not recommended for teaching adults (Cross, 1981).

Some learners benefit from listening to a lecture while others prefer to see the information presented in a visual format. Also, some learners need to have hands-on experiences or to apply theory to practices before they commit the ideas or information to memory. Cross (1981) identifies three major styles of adult learning which include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning (p. 187). Adult learners prefer visual methods where they can see the information. They will usually sit in the front of the classroom so they can have clear images of the instructor and the classroom board; they will also turn around to look at other students as they speak (Cross, 1981). Adult learners benefit from reading or looking at the information, charts, or other graphic illustrations, and like to have handouts. By watching and observing, adult learners manage to enhance the amount of information they retain in classroom settings.

Many adult learners are also auditory learners, where they need to hear the information. Such learners usually benefit from sitting and listening to a lecture without
taking notes; they also tend to prefer group discussions. In addition, these adults will choose to listen to a book on tape rather than reading it (Cross, 1981). For example, adult learners prefer to hear the instructions or explanations from the instructor rather than reading the instructions for assigned coursework. Lastly, kinesthetic learners need to move around and participate in hands-on learning experiences. Often, these adult learners will doodle on their papers, jiggle their knees, or gesture with their hands while talking (Cross, 1981). Most adults learn or practice all three different learning styles, or with one style more dominant than the other two.

Although, Cross (1981) research remains valid there’s been limited research on adult learners’ styles since. Recent studies on learning styles by Fleming (1992, 2006) parallel most of Cross’s findings. Fleming’s Visual, Aural, Read/Write and Kinesthetic (VARK) learning style provide useful information to students about best ways to attend lectures, study for exams, and do homework based on their learning style preferences (Fleming & Baume, 2006). Similar to Cross (1981) visual (V) learners prefer to learn by picturing information or enhancing it in the form of graphs, charts, drawings, and flow diagrams. Auditory (A) learners need ample process time, interact with information orally, oral repetitions, and rephrase the information in learning (Fleming & Baume, 2006). Read/write (R) learners prefer reading and learning modes for receiving the information. Therefore, they learn from reading lists, definition, lecture-notes and textbooks. The last group of learners, Kinesthetic (K), likes to experience learning by using all their senses, including touch, hearing, taste, smell, and sight (Fleming & Baume, 2006). Kinesthetic learners prefer concrete and multi-sensory experiences in learning. Nontraditional adult students may exhibit a strong preference for one of the four modes:
V, A, R, or K, and at the same time may have weakness or strength in some other modes. Effective use of the VARK instrument in addressing variety of learning styles of adult students can help ensure teaching strategies that will maximize the learning potential of each adult student.
Part II: The New Norm: Nontraditional Adult Women

Without doubt, there are more women in college today compared to men, which makes them the majority of undergraduate students. This influx of women has also stimulated dramatic changes across traditionally male-dominated subject areas such as sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (AAUW, 2009). In addition, “women coming from low- and middle-income families are more likely than men to enroll in school” (AAUW, 2009, p. 2). Across the board, White and Asian Americans are more likely than Hispanic and African Americans to have a college degree but “African American and Hispanic women are slightly more likely than their male counterparts to have a college education” (AAUW, 2009, p. 2).

Amongst women students, the numbers of adult women students are also growing. According to AAUW (2009), among adults ages 25 to 29, women are more likely than men to have a college degree or have completed at least some college (p. 1). As a result, the new image of today’s college student is not only increasingly associated with nontraditional adult student, but is also often identified as a woman (CAEL, 2000). These women students may also be referred to as “adult students,” “re-entry students,” “returning students,” and “adult learners” (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). According to AAUW, “in 2005, more than 12 million students were considered “nontraditional,” out of a total of almost 15 million students,” and the majority of these nontraditional adult students were women (2009, p.3).

A number of characteristics separate nontraditional female students from their traditional female counterparts. According to Nitri (2001), nontraditional women students also known “as the lifelong learner – which is a member of a burgeoning group of
students who have changed the landscapes of college campuses nationwide” (p.134). The lifelong learners, or alternately referred to as the returning students, the older or mature students, represent a college seeker who has decided to attend college part-time after having delayed going to college, or an adult woman who has reentered the higher education system after leaving college for many years (Ntiri). In addition, as Ntiri states, “they are married students, single –parent students, first generation students, and financially independent students” (p.134).

Over the past two decades, shifting social norms and role expectations for women, combined with other social and economic factors, have led to a tremendous growth in the number of nontraditional women participating in higher education (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). According to Tian (1996), “to explore the forces behind the growth of women’s participation in higher education, one must understand how women’s lives have been affected by recent economic and social changes” (p. 4). Today, nearly two thirds of women expect to earn a graduate degree, and show tremendous growth and interest in obtaining professional or doctoral degrees. The women’s emancipation movement of the 1970s and the 1980s had a major impact on women’s educational and career expectations (Astin, 1998, as cited in Ntiri, 2001). As a result, attitudes toward the role of women have shifted, making it more acceptable for women to receive postsecondary education and obtain career goals (Ntiri, 2001).

Motives for returning to learning.

Many nontraditional women students enter or reenter colleges due to their desire to complete the education pursuits they began years before as traditional-aged students. The largest percentage of these women adult students may have dropped out of college
for a number of reasons, including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, and lack of focus, motivation and maturity (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Clayton and Smith (1987) identify five primary motives for nontraditional women students to enter or reenter colleges (p.94). These motives were developed with respect to age, race, socio-economic status, or other pertinent socio-demographic characteristics of the reentering nontraditional adult women.

Vocational reasons are the primary motive for nontraditional adult women’s return to learning. According to Clayton & Smith (1987), the vocational reasons are related to the adult woman’s desire to become financially self-supporting, to advance in their career or to change their job (p. 94). According to Tian (1996), changing job requirements, career demands, and shifting social roles often forces women adults to get additional education to survive or advance in the job market (p. 4). More and more women are required to earn a formal education or a college degree to sustain stability in specific jobs.

Role changes and family responsibilities, the second factor in Clayton & Smith’s study, also influence women learners to pursue higher education. Education helps nontraditional adult women get a new perspective on roles as women. Also, family life transitions or events such as marriage, divorce, or death change women’s roles in the family and enhance the need to return to college. For the single mothers, college education will enable them to raise their family’s standard and style of living (Clayton & Smith, 1987). Often, nontraditional adult women students also want to be able to make significant contributions to their family income.
Women also increasingly return to college for humanitarian reasons, underlined by “the feeling that returning to school was the thing to do and would make one’s parents proud” (Clayton & Smith, 1987, p.101). Going to college exemplifies one way for these women to want to do something important for themselves, become more respected and raise their self-esteem. Next, the need to acquire knowledge and improve oneself is also an important motive for returning to college. “Knowledge is a way of gaining better understanding of what life and the world are all about” for adult women (Clayton & Smith, 1987, p.97). According to Clayton & Smith women often question their ability to succeed and face an unpleasant psychological emotional state within themselves (p. 98). Going to college is connected to self-improvement that helps overcome feelings of inferiority and helps them keep themselves in a healthy state, mentally and emotionally. Fifty-six percent of the adult women studied by Clayton and Smith found college as therapy, which offered a way of working themselves out of an unpleasant emotional state (p.94).

**Barriers women face in college.**

In today’s complex technological environment, nontraditional students face more barriers than traditional students. Barriers to adult learners may be grouped under two categories: situational and institutional (Cross, 1981, as cited in Spellman, 2007).

Situational barriers are associated with the adult student’s external life such as part-time versus full-time enrollments, family responsibilities, work demands, and financial difficulties (Spellman, 2007). Many nontraditional women students typically perform a variety of roles in their lives, as a result, they often report experiencing conflicts and difficulties attending school, and maintaining responsibilities to family and
work. According to Calloway & Jorgensen (1994), “scholarship, fellowship and federal financial aid programs sometimes have specific stipulations that tend to exclude this students group” (p.282). Because of the situational barriers, nontraditional adult women students experience fear and anxieties about returning to school.

Institutional barriers usually relate to the policies and practices of colleges and universities that prevent nontraditional women students from participating in institutional activities or courses. In other words, institutional barriers are connected to the college or university itself. Some institutional barriers may include the lack of evening or weekend courses for working students and the availability of student services or activities geared for adult students. Also, problems with faculty and staff who are not better prepared to meet the needs of adult women students are also some of the types of institutional barriers adult learners face (Cross, 1981). Finally, many of these adult students needs are concerned with limited or nonexistent childcare facilities provided by the higher learning institution (Calloway & Jorgensen, 1994).
Part III: New Directions for the Institutions of Higher Education

According to Payette (1980), support for adult women learners can be organized into three institutional areas of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities. Academic affairs provide adult students with academic support and services related to academic advancement, for example academic advising, mentoring and tutoring. Student affairs play a major role in fostering student engagement and student activities. Student affairs provide many student activities and campus programming. Most campus buildings and facilities are accessible to adult students. Many higher education institutions provide students with a safe, modern and attractive campus to enhance positive experiences of the students’ academic journey.

Principles of support for adult learners.

Nontraditional adult women students are the growing student populations who seek higher education institutions with available institutional supports that will help them achieve academic success within their complex, adult lives. Many colleges and universities understand the positive effect of supportive educational practices on student learning and personal development. As a result, many higher education institutions have implemented new directions of specific services and perspectives for supporting the highly diverse groups of nontraditional adult students. Serving the needs of nontraditional adult students in higher education has become an important priority for institutions (Rice, 2003).

Typically, nontraditional adult students seldom focus on campus life the same way traditional students do. Yet, Kilgore and Rice (2003) stated that nontraditional “adults can learn and do develop through their engagement with [the] higher education”
environment (p. 1). Therefore, significant numbers of higher education institutions have
developed new effective models and programs intended to serve nontraditional adult
students and assist them with their academic achievement. A benchmark study,
conducted by CAEL with the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC),
reported eight principles of effectiveness for serving adult students (2000, p. 5). The eight
principles include outreach, life and career planning, financing, assessment of learning
outcomes, teaching-learning process, student support systems, technology, and strategic
partnerships.

The first principle of outreach relates to the way the higher education institution
conducts its outreach to nontraditional adult students “by overcoming barriers of time,
place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities”
(CAEL, 2000, p. 6). For example, outreach to nontraditional adult students entails
addressing their needs in ways that work for them, “taking the operations of the
admissions office, bookstore, and classroom to the places adults live and work rather than
waiting for them to come to campus” (CAEL, 2000, p. 6). In addition, faculty may
perform multiple roles including administrative duties, advising, teaching, and facilitating
in order to support outreach efforts. Many outreach programs for adult students assist
them in making an informed decision about how well the college matches their interests.
Moreover, such programs determine adult student’s goals, identifying and overcoming
barriers that keep them from continuing their education.

Life and career planning initiatives aim to address personal and career goals of
nontraditional adult students before or during enrollment to helps determine effective
ways for the students to reach their goals (CAEL, 2000, p.7). In addition, institutional
services promote flexible financing choices to help nontraditional students develop strategies to assist with their educational cost. New instructional methods, as yet another supportive initiative, promote positive teaching-learning processes which empower nontraditional adult students to stay and continue in higher education. For example, college curricula which involve adult learners as co-creators of knowledge in learning experiences or projects often designed in cooperation or directly related to the adult student’s work and personal life are gradually emerging.

Creative support systems, including cohort groups or peer mentoring programs, help nontraditional adult students enhance their capacity for self-direction and stimulate their engagement in the learning environment (CAEL, 2000). In addition, institutional student support services such as childcare facilities, support networks, adult-centered orientation and advising, flexible time-frames for enrollment, registration, and financial aid counseling, help address the life circumstances of the nontraditional adult student. Technology is increasingly playing a central role in many of those initiatives. Many higher education institutions have started to actively collaborate with other programs, departments, colleges, or even employers in order to develop and improve technology literacy opportunities to all students (CAEL, 2000).

An increasing number of colleges and universities have come to recognize the important roles of support services for student learning. The influx of nontraditional adult students in higher education is gradually transforming institutional student services, programs, support systems, and institutional facilities. All these changes aim to improve the leaning opportunities for nontraditional students in general, and for adult women in particular.
Academic support services.

In reality, nontraditional adult women students need as much support as traditional students in terms of academic support. According to Cross (1981), obtaining good academic advising is critical for nontraditional adult students. Also, nontraditional adult women students often seek to establish trusting, long-term relationships with a person of accomplishment whom they refer to as their mentor (Cross, 1981). Colleges and universities with very large enrollments are well beyond the ability of their faculty and staff to mentor adult students (Cross, 1981). All academic support services must address “the life circumstances of the nontraditional adult women such as child care, support network, nontraditional adult-centered orientation and advising” (CAEL, 2000, p.12). Furthermore, some adult learners do face deficiencies in academic preparedness when starting or returning to higher education. Hence, the women centers have appeared on campuses and universities to deal with issues of academic success for returning adult women. However, Lordi (1980) found many obstacles in servicing and helping these nontraditional adult women students including lack of funding, insufficient institutional commitment, and support for good practices that the women’s centers initiate.

Most institutions have developed, or are developing, opportunities for their students to engage in adult peer tutoring and mentoring programs. Adult student reentry and/or academic advising programs are highly valued because they help clarify the importance of learning goals, and facilitate subsequent success in achieving them. Few higher education institutions begin the reentry advising even before the admission process; such initiatives help the students invest in their own academic goals, and ensure the right fit with the institution programs (Flint & Frey, 2003).
Campus activities and programming

Campus activities and programming promote student involvement, and foster student engagement. Students who get involved in educationally-rich activities gain a more positive educational experience, and increase their leadership skills, personal, spiritual, and professional development (Payette, 1980). Many campus activities and programming are under the institutional area of student affairs. Payette (1980) stated, “the initiation of changes to accommodate the needs of the adult learner is one of the most challenging tasks before the student affairs administrator today “(p. 32). Often, the student affairs office itself does not change their normal office hours to make themselves available to nontraditional students (Payette, 1980). In addition, student activities have traditionally centered on the traditional undergraduate students.

Still, nontraditional adult learners in general and adult women in particular have found their place on many campuses. Many women’s centers, which develop and sponsor a variety of programs for adult women, have emerged throughout institutions of higher education. Nontraditional women students prefer immersing themselves in campus activities that enrich their communities and their personal lives (AAUW, 2010), and offer opportunities to build relationships (King & Bauer, 1988). In light of this, often the activities organized by the women’s centers include brown bag meetings to disseminate information, activities that are related to community-action projects and weekend or evening family fun activities (King & Bauer, 1988).

Educators, practitioner, faculty members, and staff recognize that academic and student affairs collaboration help the student’s transition and adjustment to the higher education institutions. For example, service learning programs are grounded in
partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs. Many nontraditional adult women students prefer to engage in service learning which enhances their learning and development while making contributions to their communities (Rice, 2003).

**Campus facilities.**

Nontraditional adult women students balance multiple roles as parents, spouses, children, siblings, employees, employers, and many more. University facilities such as the library, computer lab, recreation facilities, student union, book stores and others can meet the needs of nontraditional adult students by offering extended hours of operation. For example, many library facilities or resources centers are accessible 24 hours during the weekdays and operation hours during the weekend.

According to Rice (2003), the establishment of ideal institutional facilities that serve specifically adult students is important for the successful enrollment and retention of those students (p.53). “The adult student services office should be along a path of the student’s daily routine” (Rice, p.55). For example, at the University of Oklahoma, the Adult Student Office is located in Memorial Union where students can access a food court, a bookstore, a bank, a lounge, a study area, meeting rooms, a game room, and a post office (Rice, 2003). Other colleges and universities have located their adult student services office along with the institution’s student financial aid, admission, registrar, parking services, and others.

The importance of on-campus child care facilities for many nontraditional adult women students has been also noted (AAUW, 2009). Higher education institutions have started to expand access to support services that help nontraditional adult women balance the demand of family and education. AAUW (2009) reported that “Parenting students
face serious problems securing convenient and affordable child care” while they are in school (p. 4). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), the provision of quality, on-campus-based child care will allow thousands of nontraditional women to pursue postsecondary education (AAUW, 2009). Moreover, when nontraditional adult women student children are cared for in campus-based child care centers, the nontraditional adult women students demonstrate greater persistence in learning and higher grade point averages, and graduate in fewer years (AAUW, 2009). Many higher education institutions have built and provided child care centers or facilities for nontraditional adult students who need the services.

Finally, educators, practitioners, faculty, and staff are a vital part of the higher education institutional experience for nontraditional adult women students. As adult women enroll in higher education, they need information, resources, and referrals that will help them become familiar with the institutional culture, norms, and expectation of the educational system. Creating conditions that matter for nontraditional adult women will sustain their energy and commitment to academic success. Flint and Frey (2003) reported that colleges and universities have integrated supportive initiatives for adult learners in all aspects of the educational experience, from admission to instruction, to support and administrative services (p. 76). Evidence shows that many higher education institutions provide high-quality learning environments that foster learning opportunities for many nontraditional adult women students.

**The Guiding Theoretical Framework**

The literature review helped identify two major categories that guide the collection of information in this study. The first category refers to the adult women’s
experiences with the institutional support services of colleges and universities. The category captured adult women students’ thoughts on the ways they used and benefited from the available academic support services, student activities, and campus facilities. The second category that was identified through the literature review focused on the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women students pertaining to their academic journey for success. Three areas fell under this category. These areas related to adult women’s expanded roles in society, to the learning approaches that worked best for them, and to the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment.

Similar to traditional students, nontraditional adult women students rely on the supportive campus environment for their academic success. As the literature review demonstrated, institutions offered institutional academic support, different campus activities and programs, and different campus facilities to their students. These services were generally offered throughout three institutional areas: academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities. Academic affairs provide nontraditional adult women students with academic support such as academic advising, writing assistance, tutoring and many more support services related to academic advancement. Student affairs provide many campus programming and student activities that foster student engagement with other students and the institution. Adult women students who get involved in campus activities gain more positive experiences, and increase their leadership skills, personal spiritual, and professional development (Payette, 1980). Lastly, campus facilities serve many nontraditional adult women student needs by providing flexible operation hours. Many nontraditional adult women students utilize the computer lab
facilities and the library between classes while they are on campus. The use of these facilities is beneficial to nontraditional adult women students’ academic success. For example, the library can provide many resources, books, and journals in helping with their class research papers or projects.

The second category that was identified through the literature review focused on the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women students. Three areas were identified relating to the adult women’s expanded roles in society, the learning approaches that worked best for them, and the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment. Similar to adult men, adult women “view education as an important means for personal development and an avenue for intergenerational social mobility” (Nitri, 2001, p.130). Today men and women are much more alike in their educational aspirations, career plans, attitudes, and values. However, adult women’s roles in society have greatly expanded. In addition to the traditional roles of homemakers, women have been expected to do the majority of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and managing all household duties, while partaking in the labor force. According to Wolf (2009), data from U.S. Department of Labor for 2008 reported that women made up 46.9% of the total labor force aged 35 years and older (p.53). Many adult women students return to higher education as an investment in opportunities for better pay and more prestigious jobs in the labor force (Calloway & Jorgensen, 1994). In light of their expanded social roles, many adult women students need and expect support and services from higher education institutions that will help them fulfill these roles.
As Cross (1981) indicates, adult women benefit from three major styles of adult learning which include visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning (p. 187). Also, Hayes (2000) suggests that “women’s learning cannot be understood if the social contexts in which it takes place are not taken into account” (p. 51). For example, women learn by applying the information that they can directly relate to their life. Adult women also learn better from each other’s experiences as well as their own. Based on the literature review, adult women learners prefer to be responsible for making decisions involved in their learning process. Also, many adult women students value learning through direct experiences and often center learning in their own and other students’ learning experience.

The final area on adult women’s needs and expectation in higher education environment relates to adult women’s interactions and the importance of establishing strong relationship with others in their learning environment (Flannery, 2000). Gilligan’s research (1977, 1982/1993) demonstrated that women develop and gain a sense of identity in a context of connections with others rather than individuation and separation from others (as cited in Evans, Formey, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010). Gilligan found that “women saw a world that was composed of relationships” (Flannery, 2000, p. 113). Adult women prefer to build, establish, and maintain relationships with others in learning settings. Therefore, they enjoy and benefit from small group interactions, study groups, or cohorts. In addition, Gilligan (1982) suggests that “women’s sense of self and morality are integrally connected to issues of responsibility toward and care for other people” (Gilligan 1982, as cited in Flannery, 2000, p. 61). Adult women students value close interaction with instructors and advisors which helps build the adult women’s comfort in
their learning environment. Moreover, relationships with peers and mentoring networking relationships provide certain kinds of learning communities that enhance mutual support and caring in the higher education environment.
Chapter Three

Methodology

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to enhance our knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences with the institutional student services and support systems offered by a higher education institution. An additional purpose of this study was to explore the types of institutional student services and support systems that were found useful and beneficial by these women learners themselves and why they were beneficial as well as the needs and expectations of adult women learners regarding institutional support systems that they deemed unavailable but necessary.

The Research Question

The research question that guided the study was: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult women students use and experience the institutional support system and services? There were several sub questions to this research question: 1) How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s academic support? 2) How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s campus activities and programming? 3) How do nontraditional undergraduate adult women students use and experience the institution’s campus facilities and buildings?
Research Method

A qualitative research method was employed in this study. Qualitative research is scientific research consisting of an investigation that seeks answers to a question (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Qualitative research study is “effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations” (Mack, et al, 2005, p. 1). In this study, the researcher explored undergraduate nontraditional adult women students. The qualitative research also provides a complex textual description of how people experience given research issues (Mack, et al, 2005). The present study focused on the undergraduate nontraditional adult women students’ use and experiences with institutional support systems and services. Additionally, a qualitative study seeks to understand a given research problem from the perspectives of the populations it involves (Mack et al, 2005). This study helped identify the institutional support systems, campus activities, and campus facilities that support nontraditional adult student involvement and engagement.

Qualitative research was suitable for this study because it is effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, gender roles, socioeconomic status, and often contradictory beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals (Mack et al, 2005). Therefore, this qualitative method helped the researcher interpret and better understand the complex reality of the nontraditional adult women student challenges, needs, and expectations in institutional support systems and services in higher education.
In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect information. In qualitative research interviewing, the relationship between the researcher and the participants is often less formal. Hence, the “researchers have the opportunity to respond immediately to what participants say by tailoring subsequent questions to information the participant has provided” (Mack et al., p.4). The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was an interview guide with focused, semi-structured interview questions. The questions were organized under three sections. The sections of the interview questions paralleled with the institutional support systems and student services presented in literature review. Which according to Payette (1980), support for adult women learners can be organized throughout three institutional areas of academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities.

At the beginning of the in-depth interview protocol asked the participants to introduce and share background stories about themselves. Background stories were used to collect information on participants’ personal histories and perspectives about themselves as nontraditional adult women.

The first section of the interview protocol focused on the participants’ experiences with institutional support services and assistance. This section aimed to identify the available types of institutional support services in academic affairs that were used by participants. In addition, further questions in this section seeded to capture the adult women students’ thoughts on the way they used, and benefited from the available institutional support services.
The second section of the interview protocol focused on the participants’ involvement with campus activities and programming offered by the higher education institution. Campus activities and programming was offered under the institutional area of student affairs. This section aimed to identify the students’ involvement and engagement in student activities. Further questions in this section explored the campus activities and programming that were found to be beneficial to the participants. This helped the researcher determine which campus activities and programming met the needs and expectations of the nontraditional adult women students involved in the study.

The third and final section of the interview protocol focused on the participants’ experiences with the campus facilities offered in the higher education institution. This section of questions provided the researcher with information on the campus facilities utilized by the participants. Campus facilities must provide nontraditional adult women students with flexible operation hours. Further questions helped capture the information on the flexible hours of operation and on the usefulness of these facilities to the participants. Moreover, further questions addressed on how campus facilities can better meet the participants’ needs.

Throughout the interview, the researcher collected information shared by participants in the three areas of challenges relative to the needs and expectations of undergraduate nontraditional adult women students pertaining to their academic journey for success. Research literature helped identify the challenge areas related to adult women’s expanded roles in society, to the learning approaches that worked best for them, and to the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment as main areas that captured major challenges for adult women students.
Research Settings and Participants

The Site. The campus environment and campus can make an impact on the students that are attending the post-secondary institution. All the participants of this study were students at the University of Toledo (UT), a public, research university in the midwest region. As a student-centered, public metropolitan university, UT currently consists of 23,000 students (UT, 2010). “The University of Toledo (UT) and the Medical University of Ohio merged July 2006 to form the third-largest public university operating budget in the state” (UT, 2010). UT offers more than 230 undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs between the two campuses of the main campus and the health science campus. The main campus features nine modern residence halls, a bell tower, a Student Recreation Center (SRC), a Memorial Field House, a football stadium, a student union, a campus medical center, a childcare facility and state-of-the art classrooms in many of the university buildings.

All aspects of Academic Affairs at UT are administered through the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. The Catharine S. Eberly Center for Women (ECW) is an integral component under this division with the purpose of serving women learners and the community by advocating for women’s equity in education, work, and health (NCA, 2002). In addition, the UT Learning Collaborative, also under the Academic Affairs division at UT, works to create a richer and more fulfilling academic experience for all the students. Under the UT Learning Collaborative, the institution has regrouped existing services and programs in order to help guide students to be able to purposefully plan their academic career. Its services and programs include Student Customer Service, Academic Support Services for career guidance and tutoring,
Office of New Student Orientation, and others. Also, the UT Learning Collaborative includes the newly-founded College of Adult and Lifelong Learning (CALL) which provides access, career and life coaching, degree completion, and academic support to new, continuing, and reentering adult learners.

The university organizes support for its students through a broad variety of units. The Division of Student Affairs exists to provide access to services that respond to the needs of students at UT. It encompasses Student Activities, Greek Life, Multicultural Student center, Apple Tree Nursery School, Office of Accessibility, Student Recreation Center, Student Union, Career Development, Counseling Center, Student Medical Center, Office of Residence Life, International Student Services, and Office of Dean of Students (NCA, 2002). All of its programs and activities are open to all students of the university, both traditional and nontraditional.

**Participants.** The participants for this study were purposefully selected “according to criteria relevant to the research question” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 5). The participants were identified as undergraduate nontraditional adult women students at UT. These adult women students were considered nontraditional adult students with respect to age, socio-economic status, and the multiple roles of nontraditional adults. All participants were adult females, 25 years of age or older, working part-time or full-time while enrolling in college, and were financially independent. A total of ten adult women students were approached as potential participants. However, only nine out of ten participants agreed to participate in the study. Four of the participants were frequent visitors or users of the Catharine S. Eberly Center of Women (ECW) at UT. Five of the participants were from the College of Adult and Lifelong Learning (CALL) at UT. In
addition, the adult women participating in the study were enrolled in various programs at UT.

Field Procedures

The participating adult women were contacted via phone, email, or in person with an invitation to participate in the study. If a woman was interested in participating in the study, a date and time was agreed upon between the researcher and participant for a meeting. All participants agreed to meet the researcher at the University of Toledo (UT). Interviews took place between the November 15, 2010, through December, 15 2010.

Before the interview, the researcher presented the participant with the informed consent form and explained the consent form. Also the researcher explained the background, and the objective of the study. The researcher also assured the participant that all information would be kept confidential, and the participant’s identity and name would never be used or associated with the study. In order to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for participants rather than the participant’s real name. In addition, the participants were asked for their consent to be audio recorded. Finally, the participants were informed that they could control the interview and could stop at anytime they wished.

The interview questions were open-ended and were designed to offer a general structure to the interviews. There was no way to determine how long each participant would talk about each question or how they would respond. At the end of the interview, the researcher gave the participants an opportunity to ask any questions or make comments regarding the interview or the study.
Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data. During face-to-face interviews, the researcher audio-recorded the interviews. All nine interviews were then transcribed and saved as Word documents. “Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of interview data” (Mack et al., 2005, p.30). Any information that could identify the participant was deleted in an effort to protect the participant’s confidentiality.

In the process of content analysis, the researcher identified themes and used them as the code for data analysis. The themes might occur in single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire transcribed document. “When using theme as the coding unit, you are primarily looking for the expressions of ideas” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.3). Coding helped determine the number of similar responses that were given by the participants in the study. In addition, codes were made based on the words or ideas that were mentioned most often, which reflect the greatest concerns of many nontraditional adult students.

After coding the entire transcribed data set, conclusions were drawn from the coded data. This step involved “exploring the properties and dimensions of categories, identifying relationships between categories, uncovering patterns, and testing categories against the full range of data” (Bradley, 1993, cited by Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). Results of the study were presented in a descriptive and interpretive manner. Description gives information on the background and content of the study. However, interpretations represent the personal and theoretical understanding of the study.
Research Validation

To provide ways to validate the accuracy of the findings and the credibility of data analysis, the participants were given the opportunity to review the Word document transcripts to provide additional commentary. Only one of the participants chose to do so and responded to the researcher. This research validation method reduces the possibility of the researcher’s view being imposed in the data analysis.

Summary

The present chapter discusses the research method employed in this study. Also, the chapter discusses the research design, the interview questions, the type of institution the participants were attending, the selection of participants, and the data analysis procedures implemented in the study. The research design used a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. The research study was conducted at UT, a public, research university in the mid-west region. The participants consisted of adult women students in various undergraduate programs at UT. These adult women students were enrolled as part-time or full-time students. These adult women students were identified as nontraditional students who were new students, reentering, or continuing their higher education at UT. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio taped. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded and transcribed. The information collected was coded in themes.
Chapter Four

Findings

Chapter Four reports on the results of the study. The first section of this chapter summarizes the findings on the demographics of the nontraditional undergraduate adult women students who participated in the study. The participants provided information on their early educational background, employment status and family responsibilities. Next, the chapter reported findings along the two major categories that guided the collection of information in this study. The first category referred to the adult women’s experiences with the institutional support services of colleges and universities. The category captured adult women students’ thoughts on the ways they used and benefited from the available academic support, student activities, and campus facilities. The second category that was identified through the literature review focused on the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women students pertaining to their academic journey for success. Three areas fell under this second category. These areas related to the adult women’s expanded roles in society, to the learning approaches that worked best for them, and to the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment.

Demographics of the Participants

Nine nontraditional adult women students, between 26 and 44 years of age participated in the study. All participants were currently enrolled as undergraduate students at the University of Toledo (UT). Two out of nine adult women who participated
in the study were international students, two of them identified themselves as Hispanic, two of them were African American, two were White Caucasian and one of them were Asian-American. In order to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for participants rather than the participant’s real names. Ally² was married and had four children between the ages of 11 to 17. Ally was enrolled in her first semester taking two pre-requisite courses before she declared a major. Bert² was in her last semester as an undergraduate student, married, with three children between ages 1 to 10. Four of the adult women participating in the study identified themselves as single mothers. Christie² and Elle² were both working full-time and had three children. Fern² was working part-time and had two children. Irene² had only one child. Two of the adult women participants, Deb²and Gill², were both married but did not have children. The youngest participant in the study, Halle², identified herself as an African American woman, single, 26 years old and working full-time.

**Background of the Participants**

**Early education.** Both of the adult women students, Ally and Bert, had pursued some sort of higher education in their country of origin. Both of these adult women had an opportunity to transfer most of their coursework to UT and continue their undergraduate studies. Five of the participants did enter college right after high school. However, Christie discontinued going to college after two semesters because of unexpected pregnancies, while Halle discontinued going to college because of financial issues. Fern was failing her classes and decided to drop out after her second year in

² The pseudonym for the participant’s real name
college. The other two adult women, Deb and Gill, were continuing their education as part-time nontraditional students.

Elle did not enter college after high school because of family responsibilities. Her response on reasons for not continuing college after high school was, “I already had one child, who was born when I was 16. So, I had my daughter at 16 and I had to start working after high school to support her. “However, Elle finally returned to college after receiving tuition fee benefits from her employer. For Irene, she did not finish high school. Later during her adult life, she enrolled in a local community college in a GED completion program. Then, she continued her education at the same community college for an associate’s degree before transferring to UT for her bachelor’s degree.

**Employment status.** Only seven out of the nine adult women participants worked more than 35 hours per week while in school. Halle was the only participant working two jobs while in college. Out of the seven adult women students who worked, Elle and Christie were employees at UT. Hence, these two women received tuition fee benefits from the institution. Fern was working at a factory and decided to take the buyout from the factory to continue her higher education.

**Motives to return to learning.** Fern’s and Irene’s motive to return to higher education was to set an example and become a role model to their children. Irene’s response was:

Initially, when back to school when he [son] was in 6th grade. I was 28 years old, when I when back to school. I was a role model [to her son]. I was also practicing what I was telling him about education and pursuing higher education. I hope I was setting an example for him, that I was practicing what I was preaching.

For Fern, she believed it was important for parents to set an example for their children. “I want them [the children] to know that, you can do it no matter how old you are. You can
come back to school.” Bert’s and Ally’s motives for returning to higher education were a desire to become financially self supporting and obtain career advancement at their employment. Bert responded, “I was working and I realize that they [employer] doesn’t value my work even it was quality work. I got lower salary because I don’t have certificate [bachelor degree] to prove I can do a good job. “For Christie, Elle, and Halle, going to college exemplified one way for them to want to do something important for themselves and raise their self-esteem.

Category One: The Institutional Support Services

**Academic support.** The Writing Center was one of many services under academic affairs that all participants used at UT. Elle utilized the e-writing center through the virtual distance learning website. Four of the participants visited the writing center because it was required by the professor for their composition class. Four of the participants visited the Eberly Center for Woman (ECW) frequently. One of the participants found the ECW very “student-oriented” offering a “friendly environment for the nontraditional adult women population.” In addition, Ally and Bert were enrolled in programs offered by ECW such as Brown Bags, Return to Learning, and computer classes. The Return to Learning program has provided guidance to Ally to consider a college education and “helped learn about the UT admissions process and financial aid.” The final type of academic support that participants reported using was the academic advising services. Fern’s response was, “my college advisor is very helpful in making recommendations to me and had a good answer for me that make sense, that help me make good decisions.”
A similar response was,

It wasn’t just the fact they [advisors] gave me the information and the answer, but the way they [advisors] did it. They [advisors] all friendly, they [advisor] all give me the attitude that they [advisors] really care about helping me succeed here.

**Campus activities and programming.** Out of nine participants interviewed for the research study, three participants, Halle, Deb, and Christie, did not participate or engage in any campus activities, events, or programs at UT. The student organization or activities mentioned in the interviews included: Ministry Student Group under Toledo Corpus Ministry (TCM), Black Student Union, African American Student Organization (AASO), Muslim Student Association (MSA), Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS), Spectrum-LBGT program, the Performing Jazz Assemble, Career Services and Honor Society. Christie, who did not report on participation in any student activities, remembered participating in Greek Life during her freshmen year in the past. However, she was pregnant and “did not continue rush for the sorority. “It was under campus activities and programming that participants shared their need for activities not available to them.

Elle’s response was,

You know, sometimes I get really just burn-out and I have just not look [do not want to look] at anything for school’s stuffs for 24 hour. I feel like I loose my intelligence all [of a] sudden. To have a social and fun activities for a group of student like us are needed as stress reliever. UT should provide family-oriented activities or family fun event for single parent like me.

**Campus facilities.** All participants were familiar with UT campus facilities and buildings. The campus facilities that were often used by the nontraditional adult women student in this study were the Carlson Library and the Student Union. Other than the library, Fern and Gill preferred to visit Memorial Field House because it was “one of the
quiet buildings at UT to study, or eat lunch.” All participants were familiar with and visited Rocket Solution Center (RSC), located in Rocket Hall. Bert’s response was, “I used RSC when I have issues related to class registration, financial aid, billing, student account and other issues.” Fern utilized the computer facilities at the Carver Center in Gillham Hall. Irene mentioned using “the Student Health Center a few times throughout the semester.” Deb enjoyed doing her research at the Ward M. Canaday Center on the 5th floor of the Carlson Library. Elle’s response on campus facilities was, “the REC Center [Student Recreation Center] if you register less than 12 credit hours you are limited to only 15 visits per semester.”

**Category Two: The Challenges, Needs and Expectations**

**Adult Women’s Expanded Roles in Society.** Almost all the participants described their multiple roles as their number one challenge as nontraditional adult women students. Many said “as a mom, I am always juggling time and responsibility,” “I worked so I don’t really have time,” and “always trying to find more time to get stuff done around the house. “A similar response from Christie was,

I do look at the activities on campus that I would love to go to but time is very critical for me. In the evening, I need to find a babysitter. I spend my day at work or school. I prefer to play mommy at night. As a single mom, I’m their mom and dad. Also, if something really interests me on UT website I am not sure driving back to campus will be worth the time. Why waste my time?

Another response was,

As far as helping with homework or tutoring [were offered] at unconventional time, when you are working full-time and going to school sometimes assessing services is impossible. Or finding resources and help that available more on those of traditional hours. The lab and library, they tried to accommodate you but you know, there always those times - funky time. Being an adult student, you only in campus for classes [on campus during class schedule]. You don’t get to utilize the whole campuses and services.
Irene mentioned that she enjoyed her role as a nontraditional adult student at UT. Irene’s response was,

Being in UT, definitely like [feel] an antique. Sometimes they [traditional students] responses on question or the example they used, you really know how old you are. But the professor always tries to include you or look for that mature perspectives or real world experience. In my other job experiences, I had to work with diverse people, so that can bring those skills into group project. I always values their [traditional students] fresh perspectives relating to what’s going now, showing similar to what they when through, I when through. It keeps you young.

Bert agreed that her role as a nontraditional adult student limited her ability to participate in campus activities. Her response was, “If I am a traditional student there’s a lot of things to do [students activities] such as International Student Association and African American Association but I am not.”

All participants agreed they benefited from UT institutional support systems and services and the institution supported them in their role as nontraditional adult students. Deb’s response was, “UT do [does] provide support for nontraditional students. My issues are related to personal and outside educational institutional boundaries.” Another similar response was, “TCM [Toledo Corpus Ministry] always help me out and make me feel welcome, I do not feel out of place.” For Ally, “UT do [does] accommodate nontraditional adult student by offering evening class.” Also, Ally seemed happy that UT provided the Center for Women to support her role as a woman in higher education. Ally’s response was,

The campus facilities are so big. So I’m not familiar with any campus activities or facilities. But I received help by using the ECW [Eberly Center for Women]. ECW return to learning program. The success program and return to learning program to get [helped] me familiar with the learning higher education environment in the U.S [United States].
Bert’s response was,

I think that going back to school has helped me realize that you can be strong, you can be powerful, you can speak out and you can still be a woman, and that is okay. Without the women center I might not be here today.

A similar response by Fern was, “I sit in women violence committee. I am very active in women’s rights. I also participate in ‘Take back the night’ and I did attend a program for strengthening and empowering women [Women’s Empowerment Summit] at Student Union last year.” Another important role that these nontraditional adult women experienced in higher education was as conduits of culture and heritage. Elle’s response was, “I sit in the Hispanic Heritage Committee Month… I am Hispanic, so I try to participate or get involve with my own culture.”

**The Learning Approaches that Worked Best.** Almost all participants agreed that they had different learning styles than traditional students. Christie’s response was, “I don’t really like to participate but few professors made it compulsory to participate. I prefer to sit and listen to a lecture.” For Halle and Gill, both adult women preferred to choose their own classes instead of having them chosen by the advisor. Halle’s response was,

I like to take class that I am interested in not only because I have to. I do better at studying and comprehend the information if I want to know or interest me. For example, I love art. I try to choose my elective courses on art stuffs [subjects]. I’m excited. Next semester the class will be at CVA [Center for Visual Arts] at the Museum [Toledo Museum of Art]. Nice building!

Gill’s response was,

I have been in school for a long time. I keep on changing majors and failing my classes. I hate the classes in my study plan. I took WGST [Women’s and Gender Studies] and I love it. I talked to the professor and switch my major. Now, I ace all my classes, love, love, love, writing paper on women’s issues. Finally, I know my interest and can get [a] degree out of it.
Elle enjoyed taking classes online. For Elle distance learning courses were “convenient,” “provide excellent module,” and “easy to follow.” According to Elle, “I feel that is hard to be in University, you need to be ground [strong] minded to be at this level education [higher education] such as this.” However, Halle had an opposite response regarding distance learning courses. Halle’s response was,

If you see the module for the courses online, it does not give you a lot of information. I took history class and the professor teaches the class like an online courses and I am old school. I don’t like even web-assist class. I like to turn my paper in but everything has to be submitted online, quizzes online, discussion online. Then, I don’t have internet, which I have to pay for….who learn that way? Not me!

All agreed that peer groups helped enhance their learning ability. Deb’s response was,

“study group helped memorization. You repeat out loud to each other on the concept or terms from the textbooks.” For Fern, study groups provide her with “different ideas” and “help process” the information from class. Bert and her group “divided each person with different chapter and create flashcards.”

Ally admitted that she would learn better if she was constantly writing and taking notes in class. Ally’s response was,

I have to take notes while listening to lecture. I write everything. Then, when I studied I copy my note to another notebook. When I try to recall what I learn, I write it down.

For Irene, she preferred to learn content that was relevant to “her real lives” and offered “immediate application.” A similar response from Christie was, “It always catchy and interesting when professor give examples or scenario to help you learn better.”

The Importance of Establishing Strong Relationships. All participants agreed that establishing a relationship was the most important aspect for their enrollment and retention as nontraditional adult women students. Five of the adult women built strong
relationships with their advisors. Elle’s response was, “I have three people that play important roles in my education journey- three advisors.” A similar response from Fern was, “My advisor… I looked up to her as my mentor.” As a mentor, they enjoyed “sharing stories, real life experience and exchange knowledge between each other.” Also, the advisor went “beyond her job requirements,” and helped Elle to “look for an internship opportunity.” The internship opportunity later turned into a full time job position. Halle agreed that the relationship with her advisor helped her with the transition to college. She said,

> My relationship with my advisor from CALL [College of Adult and Lifelong Learner] really helped me with my transition coming back to school. She gives me an idea of career or what to do. Reflect on what I want to do…even after I graduate, I feel I can still contact her.

For Irene, she felt it was important to “establish rapport with others” in or out of the classroom. A similar response from Gill and her response was, “TCM is a multilayer group and during transition in college, I rely on them, they become part of you.” Christie found her peer adult cohort helped her get through on rough days. Christie’s response was,

> Sometimes, it’s hard to keep on going. I talked to few of my friends who are adult students and single parent similar to me. We try to meet up and have lunch when we both at school. I met one of my friends at UT’s Women Center. She also have kids same age as mine. It helps me realize I am not the only one…we both in the same boat.

All participants agreed that building strong relationships was similar to establishing a support system for them. Elle’s response was, “childcare is a big issues. Thank God, I have family as support to help me locally.” Ally’s response was, “a circle of friends of other nontraditional adult students help become my support system. “A similar response from Bert was,
Support system…you need somebody to help you out. Build that relationship to get you motivated so, you can channel it out. Important to reach out and you need to open up. But, I do have my husband as my support system to help me.

Halle’s response was,

Once you participate in a program or event you sign-up to receive updated email on upcoming event. You become a member, active or not you get prompt email on the activities or update on what they doing. This show that the student organization is trying to build a good relationship with you and other students.

Summary

The nine interview participants responded to the interview questions in different ways and this chapter has provided the results of the analysis. All nine participants agreed that institutional support and student services played an important role for their academic success. However, their needs and expectations were challenged by their expanded roles in society as nontraditional adult women students in the higher education environment. Also, all agreed as nontraditional adult woman students that each of them had different learning styles and abilities compared to traditional women students. Adult women rely on interactions and relationship with others in their learning environment. For these adult women establishing strong relationships and support systems was important to their academic experience and goals.
Chapter Five

Discussion, Recommendation & Conclusion

This final chapter provides discussion of the findings that were presented in Chapter Four, and draws conclusions related to nontraditional undergraduate adult women students’ experiences with the institutional support systems and services at the University of Toledo (UT). Interviews captured adult women students’ thoughts on the ways they used and benefited from the available academic support, campus activities, and campus facilities. Interviews also identified the challenges, needs, and expectations of nontraditional adult women students. The information collected provided many insights, summarized as themes that were then related back to findings in the literature review. The findings that emerged from interviews reflected the participants’ experiences with institutional support and services and identified challenges related to adult women’s expanded roles in society, to the learning approaches that worked best for them, and to the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment presented in the literature review. The chapter ends with recommendations for higher education practitioners and policy makers responsible for creating institutional support environments.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to enhance our understanding of how nontraditional undergraduate adult women students experience institutional support systems and services. Also, the research study explored the available types of institutional support
systems and services undergraduate adult women students found beneficial to their academic success. Many higher education institutions have come to recognize the important role of student services and support systems in the lives of nontraditional adult women students.

The findings of the study presented in Chapter Four relate to several findings in the literature review pertaining to nontraditional adult women students’ experiences with the institutional support services of colleges and universities. Background information revealed that the nontraditional adult students participating in the study varied in age, between 26 and 44 years. All the participants in the study met one or more of the criteria of nontraditional adult students presented in the literature review. The criteria included: attend college full-time or part-time, are financially self-supporting, works full-time or part-time while enrolled, are married, or have children.

Unlike traditional students, nontraditional adult students, and women in particular, are influenced by their life changes, and desire to become financially independent as motives for participating in higher education (Levin, 2007). Different motives to return to learning presented in the literature review were echoed in the words of the women participating in the study. Vocational reasons were the primary motive for the nontraditional adult women participants’ return to learning. The vocational reasons were related to the women’s desire to become financially self-supporting and to advance their career, or change their jobs (Clayton & Smith, 1987). Another motive that influenced these women learners to pursue higher education was their desire for self-improvement. Women often question their ability to succeed and experience an unpleasant psychological emotional state related to this desire. Going to college overcomes feelings
of inferiority, helps women become more highly respected, and raises their self-esteem (Clayton & Smith, 1987). Two of the adult women participants indicated their wish to become a role model and to set an example to their children as their motives for return to learning. These women “were motivated by the feeling that returning to school was the thing to do and would make one’s parents [family members] proud” (Clayton & Smith, 1987, p.101).

The literature review helped identify two major categories or themes that related to the women’s use and experiences with institutional support services, and the challenges and needs of adult women learners while in college. More specifically, the first category or themes referred to the adult women’s experiences with the institutional support systems and services offered by colleges and universities. The category captured the adult women students’ thoughts on the way they used the available academic support, campus activities and programs, and campus facilities support. Based on the information generated from the responses by the participants, and discussed in Chapter Four, the higher education institution offered institutional support systems and services for nontraditional adult students throughout the institutional areas of academic affairs, student affairs and campus facilities. The nontraditional adult women students in the study used and benefited from campus activities and institutional support that were primarily academic oriented, rather than social in nature. For example, many of the participants utilized the writing center, the Eberly Center for Women, and academic advising. These institutional support services were considered academic support offered by the academic affairs division. Tutoring services were also considered an academic support and services offered by the institution. However, many nontraditional
undergraduate adult women students in the study did not have the opportunity to utilize the services because of the services did not provide flexible hours of operation.

The nontraditional undergraduate adult women participants indicated involvement in programs or activities that related to their gender, religious, and cultural heritage beliefs and values. These types of activities promoted self-directional learning for the nontraditional undergraduate adult women students, which echoes prior research findings on adult learning theory presented in the literature review. The nontraditional undergraduate adult women students preferred immersing themselves in campus activities that would enrich their culture, and bring more value to their personal lives. Often, many adult students prefer alternative programming, not the stereotypical traditional experience of college (CAEL, 2000). Nontraditional undergraduate adult women students also highly value programs and activities that provide practical information, such as information on time management, and prefer panel discussions, or activities that promote interaction and help build a network with faculty and peers. In addition, it was under the area of campus activities and programming where participants shared their need for activities not available to them. The majority of the adult women participants indicated a great need for more family-oriented campus activities or programming. Regarding their use of campus facilities, the nontraditional adult women participants indicated that they benefited from campus facilities that were easily accessible to them and offered flexible hours of operation.

The second category or theme that was identified through the literature review focused on the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women students when in college, and how the women’s use of campus support and facilities aligned with these
challenges. Under this category, challenges emerged that related to three areas: the adult women’s expanded roles in society, the learning approaches that worked best for them, and the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment.

Many adult women students juggle multiple roles while attending college (Fairchild, 2003). “Higher education is one of many activities adult students are involved in” (Fairchild, 2010, p. 11). Generally, adult women often are working full-time or part-time. In addition to their work role, adult women are also the primary caregivers for their children and family. Almost all the participants in the study agreed that as adult women students, they were still responsible for their traditional roles of homemakers, where women have been expected to do the majority of domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children, and managing all household duties (Tian, 1996). Despite the complex expectations related to their multiple roles, adult women students learn and grow as much as, or more than, traditional-aged students in college (Fairfield, 2010). Hence, higher education practitioners and policy makers must be aware that adult women students make great sacrifices to enroll in higher education institutions. For many adult women, having to balance multiple roles as caregiver, employee, and homemaker are their priorities in life and surpass their role as students (King & Bauer, 1988, p. 78). However, they are more highly motivated in learning; but lack of time to fully engage in student-related activities was one of the major challenges that all participants shared.

There was much overlap with prior research findings regarding the learning approaches that worked best for the nontraditional adult women student participants in this study. The literature review identified several learning approaches that worked best
for adult women learning. Considering the responses from the participants, adult women students “prefer self-direction in determining the goals and outcomes of their learning” (Knowles, 1984 cited in Ross-Gordon, 2003, p. 43). The evidence presented in the data analysis indicated that the adult women aged between 26 and 44 years of age who participated in the study did not want someone else to tell them what they needed to learn. In addition, the learning styles preferred by the participants paralleled two of the three major styles of adult learning, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, identified by Cross (1981). Some of the adult women students expressed that they needed to “see” the information. Simply listening was not enough for the visual learner. And for the kinesthetic learners, these adult women preferred to “just do” rather than read or talk about it (Cross, 1981). Recognizing the individual differences related to the adult women students’ learning styles and abilities revealed the way nontraditional adult women students experienced college and worked towards the achievement of their personal and educational goals.

The majority of the adult women participants indicated that establishing relationships ultimately benefited their academic success in higher education. The significance of relationships in women’s lives has been established with “the idea that women define themselves and view their world primarily in relationship to others” (Gilligan, 1982). Judging by the responses provided by the adult women participants in the study, adult women seek to build, establish, and maintain supportive relationships at three different settings: school, home, and the higher education institution. This significance of the relationships emerged throughout the literature review on the challenges, needs, and expectations of adult women students. Literature suggests that
many higher education institutions have created support systems, including cohort or peer mentoring programs, help build supportive learning communities and stimulate nontraditional adult student engagement in the higher education environment (CAEL, 2000). Also, adult women students tend to seek relationships with other adult women students in higher education as a support system. Engaging in campus activities and programming helped nontraditional adult women students establish relationships with the higher education institution. According to King and Bauer (1988), supportive communities in the learning environment may provide opportunities for friendship and promote leadership among nontraditional adult women students (p. 83). Possible forms of involvement emerge through the wide variety of student activities and campus programming available for nontraditional adult women students that help them engage and establish supportive relationships in the higher education environment.

Nontraditional adult women also seek support systems at home from their spouse, family members, and relatives while continuing college.

**Recommendations**

The changing social norms and roles for women have led to a tremendous growth in the number of adult women who are participating in higher education (Hayes, 2000). This section presents several general recommendations for institutional practices that create supportive learning environments for adult women students.

Building cohesive networks among students is essential for nontraditional adult women students. “Discussion boards, group projects, collaborative projects, dialogical interactions, programs and campus activities offer a framework for bonding and support among students” (Wolf, 2009 p. 57). Environmental and interactive adjustments need to
be established in class and out of class to reinforce the value of personal and intrapersonal relationships among learners (Wolf, 2009). “At Fayetteville State University, commuter students formed the Achieving Understand Towards Off-Campus Students (AUTOS) group to meet the needs and advocate” on behalf of the commuters and adult student population (Kuh et al, 2005, p.254). In an effort to promote commuters and adult students’ involvement in campus activities, AUTOS keeps commuters and adult students informed about campus events, sponsors workshops, and other activities designed to promote academic success (Kuh et al, 2005). Higher education practitioners and faculty can create the conditions for support groups, peer mentoring, or student organizations that encourage positive attitudes and social relationships among different groups. But ultimately, the adult women students must engage and participate to gain the benefits of the relationships and the supportive communities while enrolled in higher education.

Another recommendation is to create a unique orientation program tailored to the nontraditional adult student. Adult orientation programs can help nontraditional adult students and women students in particular to anticipate problems that may arise from role conflicts and gain realistic expectations about negotiating family, school, and employment responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003). Orientation programs also can help students connect with one another and begin to build social support networks among nontraditional adult students. Time is critical for many adult students. Therefore, orientation programs for adult students must provide flexibility and choices to adult students at different times, afternoons, and early evenings. The transition orientation program for nontraditional and adult students at Texas A&M University in College
Station invites spouses, significant others, children, and support network to this orientation program (Rice, 2003). “A variety of interest sessions provides all members of the adult students’ families information about the challenges, joys, and possible barriers” of adult students while they [adult students] enrolled in higher education (Rice, 2003, p. 55).

Numerous research studies support the assumption that adult women students exhibit different learning styles than traditional students. CAEL (2000) suggest, it is important for higher education practitioners to “engage the adult learners in a thorough process of education and career planning to determines their level of educational development upon entry, their educational and career goals and a plan for reaching these goals” (p.7). Self-assessment and evaluation of future educational development and career planning will help identify learning resources and adult women’s needs to enhance their academic success. In formal learning environments, in addition to the traditional kinds of teaching and learning, one approach is for faculty to “design a curriculum and instructional activities that balance adult students’ mixed preferences for learner-centered (flexible and responsive) and teacher-centered (structured) learning environments” (Ross-Gordon, 2003, p. 50). Another recommendation for enhancing adult learning is for higher education practitioners and faculty members to be more sensitive to the individual differences of nontraditional adult women students related to learning styles, gender, culture, and adult characteristics.

In helping nontraditional adult women students cope with their nonacademic responsibilities, the higher education institution must recognize the characteristics and multiple roles of adult students. Higher education practitioners and faculty members
should encourage nontraditional adult women students to share and reflect upon their multiple roles as employees, caregivers, homemakers, and students. By creating awareness of nontraditional adult women students’ struggles and barriers, when appropriate, other students can provide additional assistance when needed. Creating more flexibility for group project meeting time is one example of capitalizing on the support of other students. Often, when higher education practitioners and faculty members encourage nontraditional adult women students to share and address their life circumstances, many adult women claim they feel more welcome and develop a stronger sense of belonging to the institution (Fairchild, 2003). Another recommendation, suggested by Spellman (2007), relates to the ways to reduce or eliminate institutional barriers that prevent adult women students’ ability to manage their multiple roles. One such way is to offer “program[s] in several formats, evening and weekend programs, distance learning, and specialized programs such as career pathways” (p. 74).

A final recommendation, already initiated by many higher education institutions, is to create offices serving primarily adult students. These offices help adult students learn about nontraditional scholarship programs, registration, advising, counseling, career choices, networking with other students, and commuting problems (Hardin, 2008). Another beneficial component of an adult student services office is financial planning and budgeting services. Many adult students received financial aid to enroll in higher education; however because of the barriers and multiple role burdens, many adult students discontinue college (Rice, 2003, p.54). As a result, the adult students experience the financial burden of paying the student loan without accomplishing their academic goal. An adult student services office needs to address this issue and provide financial
planning and budgeting information to all adult students. In addition, the publicity of the office should be directed towards all members of the higher education institutions including the faculty members. “Without campus awareness of the needs and availability of support to adult students, the office can become underutilized” (Rice, 2003, p. 55). Hence, if the students have been identified as adult students, appropriate referrals and resources should be directed to the adult student services office.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

More research on supporting the nontraditional adult women student in higher education is needed to further explore the nontraditional adult women students’ experiences in college and the support services offered to them in higher education setting. An addition, future research could analyze and compare the experiences between adult students during the same time frame based on demographic characteristics (e.g. same age, number of children and marital status). This will help the researchers explore different types of women students’ generational, or age differences while enrolled in higher education and how their specific age correlated with their experiences in college. Further study could consider and compare the experiences between gender of adult students, male and female, during the same time frame. The study could determine if the male adult students also have expanded roles in society that influence their involvement for institutional support services and campus activities. Also, determine if the male adult students also experiences similar challenges, needs, and expectations as many adult women students pertaining to their academic journey for success.
Conclusions

The face of higher education is changing, where the typical college student is no longer the traditional student age 18 to 25 year old that is living on campus. According to Mbilinyi (2006), “only 16 % of those pursuing higher education in United States now fit that mold” (p. 2). Hence, older, employed, care giving, and commuter adult students have composed increasingly larger proportions of the college student population. Even with rising costs of higher education, most American adults believe that the benefits of education are worth the investment (Mbilinyi, 2006). Despite the high value placed on higher education and the motivation of many adults and adult women in particular to pursue it, “the challenges present significant hurdles” (Mbilinyi, 2006, p. 4). Clearly, there is a great need to understand how nontraditional adult students experience, and use institutional support systems and services. Also, we need to examine which institutional support systems and services adult women students find beneficial to their academic success.

The literature review for this study defines the nontraditional adult learners, summarizes existing definitions, discusses the challenges and risk factors adult students face, and offers an overview of the learning styles that work best for them. Adult students represent a large percentage of college students today (Kilgore & Rice, 2003). In some respects, the higher education practitioners and faculty members must distinguish nontraditional adult students from traditional students to better serve them. The literature review also defined nontraditional adult women, the motives behind their decision to return to higher education, and the barriers adult women faced in a college environment. Nontraditional adult women students’ challenges, needs, and expectations were equally
important but somewhat different from the traditional-aged groups of students. Obviously, higher education institutions must create supportive environments for nontraditional adult women. Finally, the literature review explored the academic support, campus activities and programming, and the campus facilities, traditionally offered by institutional areas such as academic affairs, student affairs, and campus facilities, that were geared towards adult learners in general and adult women in particular. In conclusion, the literature review offered a framework that guided the study into exploring the ways adult women students used and experienced institutional support and services, and inquiring into the challenges nontraditional adult women students experienced related to their expanded roles in society, to the learning approaches that worked best for them, and to the importance of establishing strong relationships with others in their learning environment.

The study used a qualitative method of inquiry. Information was collected from nine nontraditional adult women undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Toledo. All the nontraditional adult women students participated in the study agreed that institutional support systems and student services played an important role for their academic success. However, they all experienced challenges, needs, and expectations stemming from the variety of societal roles they had and their status as nontraditional adult women student in the higher education environment. Moreover, all participants agreed that establishing relationships and support systems were important to their academic experiences and success. Also, all agreed that as nontraditional adult woman students, each of them had different learning approaches compared with the traditional women students.
The nontraditional adult women students present challenges and opportunities to higher education institutions. According to Kilgore & Rice (2003), “to serve this large population, we must recognize that they exist [the nontraditional adult women students] and that they exist [the nontraditional adult women students] are different from our conceptions of traditional-aged students” (p. 91). For many higher education practitioners, it will be a challenge to serve all nontraditional adult women students, or make drastic policy changes to the institution approaches for the nontraditional adult women student population. However, higher education practitioners ultimately can make a difference in nontraditional adult women’s lives one student at a time (Fairchild, 2003). By being a “life preserver to that one student, you are working toward making the institutions more accommodating to adult women students as a group” (Fairchild, 2003, p. 15). Again, the higher education practitioners may enhance the institutional environment to accommodate and serve these nontraditional adult women students, but ultimately the nontraditional adult women students also must adapt their priorities to fit college into their lives to achieve their academic goals.
References


Kasworm, C (2003). Setting the stage: adults in higher education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 102, 3-10.


Appendix A

Research Proposal Questionnaire Guide

Supporting Non Traditional Adult Women in Higher Education
Dr. Snejana Slantcheva-Durst and Shazlina Corder

A semi-structured of open-ended questionnaire will guide our interviews. The major topic and questions include:

1. Background
   a. Briefly, tell me a little about yourself (education, employment, family responsibilities, reasons to come back to school)

2. Experiences with institutional support services and assistance
   a. How important is support from the institution for your success? Why?
   b. What are your expectations regarding support? When do you think support should be offered, or is needed?
   c. How would you describe the support you received from UT? What kinds of support have you received?
   d. What was most helpful or beneficial to you and what was not needed?

3. Use of campus activities and programming
   a. What kinds of programs and activities have you participated in?
   b. Why?
   c. How did they benefit you?
   d. What do you think might be further needed and geared to your specific needs (review some available activities and programs from UT for further elaboration)

4. Experience with campus facilities
   a. Tell me a bit about the campus facilities that you have used
   b. What has been beneficial to you and why?
   c. How can facilities be geared towards better addressing your needs?