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**WHAT NEXT? POST-GRADUATION PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE
STUDENTS IN THE THIRD AGE OF LIFE**

DISSERTATION

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University**

By

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2002**

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ABSTRACT

The demographics of aging are stimulating a re-examination of many societal structures as they relate to and impact older adults. By the middle of the 21st century, the demographics of aging, the large percentage of older adults with high school diplomas, and the evolving nature of retirement assure college population growth among those in the third age of life. Commitment of scarce educational resources to retirement aged adults prompts questions about potential benefits to society and exploration of the concept of productive aging.

This qualitative study posed several questions: What happens to older adult college students after they graduate? Did their collegiate experience include post-graduation planning? If not, what type of planning would have been helpful? The purpose of the study was to identify the post-graduation transition needs of women over the age of 60—in the third age of life—and to offer a proposal for services to meet those needs. Twenty women between 60 and 88 were interviewed. Nine of them were students at the time of the interview and 11 possessed completed degrees earned after the age of 60.

The study reveals that many older students either do not perceive the need for post-graduation planning at the time they are enrolled as students or do not have the energy to devote to it while concentrating on the rigors of

coursework. However, during the year of transition following graduation, a significant number experience a desire to discuss life after college with a trusted adviser or professor whom they perceive as then unavailable to them. Directly related to current research on “the senior year experience,” this study recommends further exploration of a “senior year plus one experience.” It also reveals older adult interest in post-graduation activities involving creativity, mentoring, research, service to the community, and intergenerational involvement.

These data lead to a comprehensive proposal for services to older adults that begin with the admission/orientation process and extend to at least a full year after graduation. Emphasis is placed on the importance of a senior year seminar that includes discussion of transition theory, questions to promote reflection about life after college, a process for charting learning from life experience and its relationship to recent collegiate learning, an opportunity to engage in life review, exploration of a wellness model, assistance in developing one or more resumes, introduction to the college’s service-learning program and staff, an invitation to serve the college community in a variety of ways, and access to anyone on campus with information or skill to assist in the preparation for life after college.

**Dedicated to my father, Edward Barody,
who blessed his two daughters at birth with
the desire to learn lifelong**

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While the title page of this dissertation bears my name as author, so many others who have contributed to the process must be acknowledged.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All considerations of education for older adults in the United States are grounded in two factors: the *growth of the elderly population* during the last half of the 20th century combined with projections for even more dramatic growth in the first half of this century and the *steadily rising level of educational attainment* within this population. From 1900 to 1994 the elderly population—those over 65—increased 11-fold while those under 65 increased only 3-fold. Modest growth is projected for 1990 through 2010 to be followed by two decades of sharp increase when that “human tidal wave” known as the Baby Boom generation enters the 65+ age range. U.S. census statistics for 2030 project an elderly population of 70.2 million, with one in five persons residing in that category. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).

Census figures also reveal that as younger cohorts age, their level of educational attainment is steadily rising. In 1960 within the 65 and over age category, 22.8 per cent of the population had achieved a high school education or above. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, cited in Manheimer, 1994). By 1993 that percentage had risen to 60.3 and by 2030 those in the same age category

holding a minimum of a high school diploma are expected to represent 87 per cent of the population. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). These statistics become crucial for educational planning given that “educational attainment is more closely related to educational participation than are...other variables used to describe adult learners” (Cross, 1981, p. 80).

Higher Education in the Third Age of Life

A statistical recital of the aging of the U.S. population belies the revolutionary nature of this demographic trend that has manifested itself in multiple and contradictory images and attitudes toward aging. Butler’s coinage of the term “ageism” (1975) in 1968 reflected the major social and economic upheaval surrounding the necessary reallocation of resources in a country that has strongly identified itself with a “youth culture.” Education—and particularly higher education—has not been exempt from an examination of its responsibilities toward the aged. Andrew Hendrickson, Ohio State University professor of adult education, identified three distinct roles for higher education in a graying society: educational research, the training of personnel to work in all areas dealing with aging, and “direct educational services to that portion of the aged which can profit by what a university can appropriately offer” (1962, p. 162).

The results of his research, funded by the U.S. Office of Education and conducted within the city limits of Columbus, led Hendrickson and Barnes to

suggest a comprehensive range of learning options for older citizens to be developed by colleges and universities, public libraries, broadcast media, public schools and other public agencies, such as recreation centers, churches, and “Y” organizations (Hendrickson & Barnes, 1967). Thirty-five years later, across the United States, a plethora of educational opportunities do exist for older learners under the sponsorship of a wide variety of agencies, including senior centers, public libraries, religious Shepherd’s Centers, Elderhostel, Learning in Retirement Institutes (LRI’s), Older Adult Service and Information System (OASIS)—a coalition between business and not-for-profit organizations—public television, and the Internet.

While acknowledging that higher education institutions participate in some of these learning activities as co-sponsors, this study is particularly concerned with “direct educational services” provided to women who pursue undergraduate degrees in the *third age*. The term “third age,” which is becoming a common designator of life after sixty, originated with a program for retirees in France in the 1970s referred to as Les Universites du Troisieme Age. “The underlying concept was that there are three ages (0-25, 25-60, 60 and up), each with unique educational opportunities” (Wolf, 1994). While there are those who would add a fourth age identified as a brief time of frailty and decline preceding death (Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995), and others who question age norms in a contemporary society where life tasks are

frequently blurred across age ranges (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987), the third age concept is frequently used in reference to education in the later years of life (Fischer, Blazey, & Lipman, 1992).

The study focuses on women and what happens to them after completing a college degree in the third age rather than on a group of mixed gender in recognition of several factors: (1) that elderly women outnumber elderly men 3 to 2 in participation in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 1997); (2) that women over the age of 65 have been identified as the fastest growing age group on campus (Bianchi, 1990); and (3) that women live longer than men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996) and seem to “adapt better to old age than do men, remain[ing] more active and involved with family, friends, and community” (Roebuck, 1983, p. 255). In addition, women in this age range form part of an age cohort born 1925-1942 described by Strauss & Howe (1991) as “silent midlifers” and type cast as “adaptive.” Women in this group married early, at age 20, and bore an average of 3.3 children. Even though men in the cohort surpassed the previous generation in educational attainment, women did not advance, and in fact, lost ground in technical fields such as engineering and architecture (p. 284). This study may provide some insight into the “catching up” task of this cohort.

An underlying rationale for this study of education in later adulthood lies in the recognition that higher education is now faced with an opportunity to expand its mission to a previously underserved segment of society in response

to an external stimulus. Just as the need for instruction in agriculture and the mechanical arts gave rise to the land grant institutions in the 19th century (Veysey, 1965), just as World War II and Sputnik gave rise to “big science” in the middle of this century (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997), and just as the G.I. Bill combined with a decreasing population in the 18-22 age cohort during the past twenty-five years has transformed many colleges from residential “youth ghettos” (Boyer, 1974) to age-integrated, commuter-oriented campuses (Levine & Cureton, 1998), so will the demographics of aging create another new audience for higher education.

Earlier Initiatives for Older Adults

To identify older adults as a population underserved by higher education is not intended to dismiss earlier initiatives intended to attract them. The tuition waiver initiative of the 1970s and 1980s was developed in direct response to a mandate from the 1971 White House Conference on Aging to remove barriers to participation in higher education for older adults. Most states drafted policies providing tuition waiver on a space available basis for college courses taken for credit or audited, but the number of participants remained small, leading adult educators to look toward factors other than cost that discouraged older adults. Cross (1982) identified traditional teaching methods that do not draw upon the learner’s experience; Weinstock (1978) focused on the second-class citizen status implied by “space available” admission. Others conducted surveys that

revealed institutional barriers such as course scheduling, registration complexity, transportation, and distant parking (Moyer & Lago, 1987).

Many of those institutional barriers—except parking, an ongoing problem for students of all ages (Kingston, 1982)—have disappeared in this decade as colleges and universities have learned to accommodate working adult *second agers*. However, it is the following survey results from the 1980s that bear most directly upon educating *third agers*: “Among educational institutions who reported no established program for the student over age 60, the barriers reported were lack of interest by faculty and administration, lack of staff time to coordinate a program, and lack of funding” (Moyer & Lago, 1987, p. 161).

A few years prior to this survey the National Council on the Aging sponsored the development of a policy manual for college administrators (Sprouse, 1982) exploring services to older adults. That document concluded with an extensive list of benefits for older learners, the general student population, faculty, and the institution. In 1993 a seminar for deans sponsored by the University of Wisconsin’s Extension Division sought their justifications for supporting older adult learning (Manheimer et al., 1995). Of the four rationales identified, two related directly to the mission of a public university—“to assure an informed citizenry” and “to provide equal access”—and two related to the pragmatics of management—“to make use of available, possibly underutilized resources” and “to cultivate future givers” (p. 24-25). Manheimer observes that none of these rationales coincides with many older adults’ motives for seeking

learning opportunities—intellectual stimulation and fellowship. Evidence suggests that educating older adults has not yet become a societal imperative nor an ideological one for higher education. When it does, colleges and universities will allocate resources to establish innovative programs, develop marketing plans targeted to the population, and compete with other institutions for eligible participants.

Model Program

Models for such programs do exist. One example is Fordham University's twenty-five year old College at Sixty, whose name derives not from its students' age but from its location at Fordham's Lincoln Center complex at 60th Street. This special division within the School of Continuing Education admits students over the age of 50 who have never attended college or who did not complete college, those who already have degrees who seek coursework for enjoyment, and their own alumni who choose to become reacquainted with their *alma mater* by taking the specially designed seminar courses. All courses are in the liberal arts, are taken for academic credit, meet once per week for two hours in the daytime, and include readings and assignments that usually culminate in an oral presentation. There are no written examinations. After completion of four special seminars, students receive a certificate of completion and are eligible to matriculate into Fordham's regular degree programs (undergraduate or graduate) without having to meet additional admission

requirements. About a dozen students choose the degree option each year and most of them are women (conversation with program director Dean Rosemary DiJulio).

It is the posture of this research that the social imperative pressing for the proliferation of such programs lies in a combination of factors that include the already described demographics of aging and educational attainment, a revised meaning and purpose of education, new theories of aging, new attitudes toward adult life span development, and new approaches to retirement.

Revised Meaning and Purpose of Education

The traditional purpose of education aimed at the young has always been preparation for the remainder of life in a manner comparable to inoculation. Endure it once, get it over with, maybe get a booster in ten years, but not necessarily. "The most profound educational change of this century is a change of attitude which no longer regards education as essentially preparatory but...as a way of meeting the demands and aspirations of the present period of one's life" (Louis Harris & Associates, cited in Cross & Florio, 1975). The inoculation metaphor has yielded to a metaphor of health maintenance for uninterrupted productivity and satisfaction. Translated by common parlance into the concept of "lifelong learning," it often narrowly refers to the workplace need to train and retrain employees in an economy based on knowledge

production and rapid technological advancement. But “lifelong learning” used broadly refers to “the continuous fulfillment of one’s self” (Boyer, 1974, p. 11) which certainly includes the fulfillment needs of older learners.

The very change in terminology from “education” to “lifelong learning” is significant since the former connotes established curriculum to which a student is admitted. Granting the student permission to pursue “an education” identifies the institution as central to the process whereas “learning” implies the active agency of the participant, with the learner as central to the process (Vermilye, 1974). Just as the survival of many independent colleges over the past thirty years depended upon adaptation to the needs of a working adult clientele (Breneman, 1983), the survival of higher education as an entire “system under fire” (Rowley et al., 1997) will depend in the next millennium upon its successful “transition from a ‘time-out’ model to a perpetual learning model” (Dolence & Norris, *Transforming Higher Education*, 1995 as cited in Rowley et al., 1997). Perpetual learning includes later life.

Social Theories of Aging

The value of including third agers in strategic educational planning is supported by evolving social theories of aging. At the midpoint of the last century attitudes toward the elderly were heavily influenced by the theory of *disengagement* proposed by Cumming and Henry (1961, as cited in Atchley, 1994). This theory characterized older persons’ withdrawal from activities and

commitments, their movement toward self-preoccupation, and separation from younger members of society as a normal transfer of power from the older to the younger generation (Atchley, 1994). Disengagement theory's presupposition that older persons have nothing left to contribute to society renders college-level learning moot, unnecessary, and even wasteful of a resource designed to prepare the young to assume their rightful role in society. Older persons seeking higher learning in this stage of life might even be perceived as "asynchronized with society for failing to surrender their educational role in society" (Covey, 1983, p. 97). Further research in the seventies modified the theory to emphasize the individual's personal choice and health status in balancing levels of engagement and social interaction (Atchley, 1994).

A second theory of *activity* attributed to Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968, cited in Atchley, 1994) suggests that older people in good health have the same interaction needs as the middle aged and that a decrease in social involvement is actually caused by society's withdrawal from them. In stressing the attempt by older persons to retain the roles of middle age, activity theory has been criticized as denying specific developmental function to old age. Activity theorists might interpret higher education in old age as an attempt to retain a role or vitality associated with middle age or an attempt to replace some lost role with the student role (Covey, 1983).

Another theory of aging, the more comprehensive and more contemporary *continuity theory*, comes the closest to explaining and supporting

higher education in the later years. According to continuity theory, adults develop “patterns of thinking and acting that continue to evolve and that [are] used continuously in adapting to changing needs and circumstances” (Atchley, 1994, p. 136). Adaptation implies capability of growth, “including intellectual growth” (Covey, p. 105). Thus, late life participation in higher education can be interpreted as an effort to adapt to change in circumstances brought about by aging while also offering an explanation for the earlier statistic citing previous educational attainment as the best predictor for education in the adult years.

Even while aging *theories* have been evolving, so too have “the meanings of age” been changing (Neugarten, 1996). Major life occurrences today are far less determined by age norms than in the past, leading up to what Neugarten calls “the fluid life cycle” (p. 48) and progressing toward “an age irrelevant society” (p. 49). This not necessarily simpler but decidedly more flexible approach to life tasks combined with the “longevity factor” (Bronte, 1993) has resulted in the blurring of life cycles and reconsideration of social transitions. “We have moved from a short-term model [of adulthood] based on a set of predictable stages...to a long-term model with no fixed stages, based on continuous growth and evolution” (p. 17). The concept of fifty as “over the hill” has given way to fifty as the “youth of Second Adulthood” (Sheehy, 1995, p. 145) and to sixty as the time to draft a life plan for the next thirty years (p. 351; Erikson et al., 1986).

Bronte's reference to a short-term stage model is represented by Erikson's (1986) sequential stage model of adult development which has served as the major theoretical framework for the study of older adulthood for several decades (Wolf, 1994). "In his model, periods of stability are interrupted by transitional crises. These crises are marked by psychosocial tasks with which individuals struggle. Adulthood is marked by the need to achieve intimacy (and avoid isolation), to be generative (as opposed to stagnant), and to achieve ego integrity (and ward off despair)" (p. 20). Erikson identifies wisdom as the goal of older adulthood, to be achieved while the elder "refaces" and integrates some of the earlier developmental stages.

A more long-term model of adult development is represented by Hudson's (1991) cyclical view. It portrays "the adult years as a Ferris wheel with up and down times that are repeated over and over again, as a cycle of continuity and change" (p. 38). While Hudson bases his model on Levinson's (1978) concepts of life structures and transitions, he differs from Levinson in refusing to correlate them with age. Designed for this postmodern age, Hudson's model views the world as chaotic, requiring the individual to possess high levels of tolerance for ambiguity and resiliency and views development as "continuous reprioritization and renewal of the same issues—identity, achievement, intimacy, play, search for meaning, and social compassion" (Hudson, p. 46). Movement through the cycle requires constant reeducation and renewal.

Similar to Havighurst's (1964) designation of adult learning needs as either "instrumental" or "expressive," Hudson maintains that reeducation needs in the first forty years of life usually fall into the category of "developmental"—vocation- and future-oriented—and in the second half of life, into the category of "transformative"—marked by integration of the self with the outer world and journey to transcendence. Productivity in the early years fuels the economy while productivity in the later years fuels the culture. Hudson acknowledges that youth-oriented higher education emphasizing expert knowledge in specific fields clearly serves economic productivity, but poses the question as to what facet of higher education serves the older adult in search of an expanded consciousness, a unifying connectedness among the ideas and experiences of a lifetime?

Hudson's cyclical view of adult renewal and development acknowledges the "dramatic differences between the styles and priorities of men and women during the adult life cycle" (p. 122). It can accommodate both genders, however, because it is based not upon "stages" of life but upon an individual's "changing commitments to fundamental human values that we all share to one degree or another" (p. 44). As participants in many different "systems"—couples', family, work, social—subject to the vagaries of life, adults constantly adapt to the functional and dysfunctional facets of those systems. Effective living requires continuous learning for adaptation to the external world and the internal world, for professional competence and for personal consciousness.

Hudson's model for reeducation throughout adulthood calls for a "new profession of adult mentors" (p. 228-231), offering a challenge to higher education faculty interested in working with older adults to become generalists with knowledge of adult development, skill in life planning and change management, in leadership training and effective networking, in referral to appropriate agencies, in group process and facilitation of self-initiated learning. Adult mentor positions created to attract and serve the heterogeneous older population could eventually redefine service to all campus constituencies when the model of lifelong learning supersedes traditional learning models.

New Meanings of Retirement

The last external stimulus to the development of innovative educational programs for older adults is the changing nature of retirement. Created by Western industrial society about one hundred years ago in order "to facilitate the continuity of effective workforces" (Walker, 1996, p. 3), today's concept of retirement is as blurred as other social institutions. The traditional model of retirement as passage for middle class workers from employment to nonemployment at the age of 62 or 65 has been replaced by a range of work/nonwork options at a range of ages. "Early retirement" from one company is often followed by full-time employment with another. Employer-mandated retirement sometimes leads to self-employment or to part-time work.

Pensioned retirement from a lucrative career can support entry into a lower-paying, social service-oriented career. Financial need may require extended employment into the 70s.

In a recent survey of baby boomers sponsored by AARP, 80% indicated an expectation to continue working past 65, in contrast to 12% of those over 65 who work today (Lewis, 1998). "Women of the baby boom are expected to spend nearly three quarters of their adult lives in the labor force" (Sheehy, as cited in Allen & Pifer, 1993 p. xiv). Motherhood and other caretaking roles have resulted in an interrupted work history for many women, leaving them with lower salaries, lower pensions, and economic vulnerability in late life (Manheimer, 1994). Dychtwald and Flower (1989) predict the ultimate disappearance of retirement in favor of cyclical periods of work and nonwork throughout everyone's life.

These factors transforming retirement will provide higher education with a growing population of potential students in need of initial or additional career education; with another segment who have the leisure time and creative energy to apply to both the arts and social problems (Allen & Pifer, 1993; McLeish, 1976); with others seeking a long-delayed sense of self-worth represented by a college degree (Guttmann-Gee, 1995); and with still others who enjoy learning for its own sake (McClusky, 1971; Cross, 1982).

The Research Question

All of the foregoing factors related to the age wave provide an external stimulus for higher education to target expansion of its degree-seeking student base into the third age and thus justify this study designed to assist higher education planners in responding to their unique needs. The literature review to follow will document a number of quantitative studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s to determine the motivation of older college students, barriers to their participation, and their areas of interest for study. Several researchers have identified the need for qualitative data that will reflect the heterogeneity of the older population and depth of personal experience. The cohort history of the growing number of women entering college in their sixties warrants a single gender study. And no other study has posed the question of this study: *What happens to older adult college students after they graduate? What do they do next after this period of intense intellectual, social, and perhaps even physical activity? What does lifelong learning mean for them now? Does the reality of their post-graduate lives differ from their expectations of life after graduation? Did their collegiate experience include post-graduate planning? If not, what type of planning would have been helpful?*

Data gathered from this initial study are intended to provide higher education planners with insight into the post-graduation transition needs of this third age constituency that may or may not resemble the tangible transition needs of the second ager moving toward a new career, professional promotion,

or graduate study. Since preparing students for successful transition into post-graduate life is an integral part of higher education's responsibility for student development, preparing third age graduates for transition into a period of life now being described as "productive aging" (Butler & Gleason, 1985) may be the rationale needed by institutions to justify the investment of resources into this truly nontraditional population. The societal imperative for education in the third age may well lie at the point of convergence between the social mission of higher education—service to society—and the outcome of older adult learning as service to society (Manheimer, 1995). Thus, the importance for third age graduates *and* higher education of the question—*What next?*

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The research and theory that support this study are drawn from the literature of adult development, adult education, higher education, and educational gerontology. The interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry contributes to its challenge and to the potential for practical application of the data generated. This review of literature reflects the various components of the study, which include theories of adult development, the concepts of the “third age” and productive aging, the issues and concerns of educational gerontology, and higher education’s relationship with older adults.

Adult Development

During the past thirty years it has become generally accepted that one of the main purposes of American colleges and universities is the intentional facilitation of developmental change throughout the life span (Chickering & Associates, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Chickering & Riesser, 1993). Within that same time span, a significant number of theories have attempted to describe psychological changes in the adult. The theories have emerged from

literature on psychological development “grounded primarily in clinical studies and qualitative biographies obtained through in-depth interviews” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 100).

The number and complexity of theories presented in the literature warrant their exploration through some organizational framework. Bee (1996) suggests a matrix with the dimensions of *development versus change* and *stage versus no stage*. However, Merriam and Caffarella’s (1999) schema of three categories—*sequential models of development, life events and transitions, and relational models*—best complements the nature of this study.

All the examples within the category of sequential models of development, “provide for an unfolding of adult life in a series of phases or stages, [but] they have different end points, from becoming autonomous and independent to finding wisdom and a universal sense of faith and moral behavior” (p. 101). Levinson and his associates (Levinson, 1986; Levinson & Levinson, 1996; Sheehy, 1976, 1995), in their studies of the life course of both men and women, have identified an “alternating sequence of structure building and maintaining periods followed by transitional periods” (Levinson & Levinson, 1996, p. 36). They assert a close age linkage between the various phases and transitions even though such an emphasis on chronological age “goes against our conventional wisdom” (p. 19). Their description of life tasks at each phase and transition functions more like a “navigational chart that gives latitude and longitude and certain features of the territory, without the geographical detail,

[rather than] a blueprint for the concrete course of an individual life” (p. 414). In this model change is assumed at various ages, but not development toward some ultimate, “better” stage.

While asserting that both men and women follow a similar path through the alternating sequences of structure building and transitions, Levinson and Levinson acknowledge that “women form life structures different from those of men [and] work on the developmental tasks of every period with different resources and constraints, external as well as internal” (pp. 36-37). A notable concept that emerged from their study of women is that of “gender splitting”—referring “to the creation of a rigid division between male and female, masculine and feminine, in human life...that limit[s] the adult development of women as well as men” (p. 38).

Erikson (1963, 1982; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986) reigns as the most influential theorist of the sequential perspective whose stage theory of development is hierarchical, with each stage built upon the former. He suggests eight life stages from infancy through old age during each of which the individual chooses from “two seemingly contrary dispositions... although vital involvement [in life] depends on their balance” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 33). The gradual but ultimate attainment in older adulthood is a fully developed sense of identity culminating in wisdom—“accepting who and what you are with active compliance” (p. 301). Essential to continued vitality at the stage of achieving wisdom is “trust in interdependence” (p. 333), knowing when

to give help and when to accept it, engaging in a process of “reflexive generativity” with younger adults. [As a point of interest, in Erikson’s ninth decade of life he and his wife shared a three-story Victorian home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a graduate student, a professor of comparative religion, and a psychologist. They often took meals together. “Living communally, said Mrs. Erikson, “is an adventure at our age” (Goleman, 1988).]

The second category of adult development models is built upon life events and transitions, offering an alternative to sequential stage theories. Life events might be specific to an individual’s life (e.g., births, death, marriage, and divorce) or to a society’s cultural life (e.g., wars, depression, women’s movement). Neugarten and Datan (1996), representing this alternative view within psychology, clearly distinguishes between life time (individual’s chronological age), social time (ages at which a society determines that certain life events should occur), and historical time (economic, political, social events that create the social-cultural context for a particular community). They also note the importance of *cohort effects* in “influencing the course of personality development over the life cycle” (p. 101). All of the above results in a social system with age-graded norms in which certain life events are expected to take place. Neugarten and Datan contend that life *crises*—incongruities between

our expectations and our experience—occur when expected life events happen at an unexpected time, or “off-time.” They thus deny that development occurs through an ordered sequence of life crises.

Bridges’ (1980) work represents a theory of “personal development that views transition as the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of the path of growth” (p. 5). He maintains that transitions begin with endings, the “precondition of self-renewal” (p. 90). Endings are quickly followed by movement into the neutral zone, “an apparently unproductive time-out at turning points in our lives” (p. 112). The final phase of transition is the conscious launch into a new beginning. Repeated often in the human life course, this same cycle occurs commonly in nature and thematically in mythology.

The third category of development models, referred to as relational models, includes the work of theorists who “view centrality of relationships as key to development” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 110). As might be expected, most of the studies falling into this category involve women’s moral and identity development, with Gilligan’s (1982, 1993) work recognized as its foundation. In counterpoint to traditional psychological theories, she “reframe[d] women’s psychological development as centering on a struggle for connection rather than speaking about women in the way that psychologists have spoken about women—as having a problem in achieving separation” (p. xv). She listened to the voices of women describing themselves and heard their identity

“defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care” (p.160) in contrast with the voices of men whose identity is marked by separation and autonomy in a “tone [that] is different, clearer, more direct, more distinct and sharp-edged” (p. 160).

Gilligan’s theory of development through relationship assumes flesh in Bateson’s (1990) study of the lives of five successful women—including herself—who have achieved their success in spite of discontinuities and distraction to the needs of others. Each of these women found ways to translate the traditional role of nurturer and caretaker within the family to a responsiveness to the larger environment. Bateson relates that *responsiveness* etymologically to the *responsibility* identified by Gilligan as “central to women’s ethical sensitivities” (p. 234).

Citing the work of Gilligan and Miller (1976) as precursors of her own, Peck (1986) offers a model of women’s adult development grounded in self-definition, a “woman’s knowledge of herself as an individual in society” (p. 277). She identifies her model as dialectical in that it demonstrates the “interrelationship between external events [social-historical time] and internal experience, describ[ing] women’s self-definition in adulthood as an ongoing process of self-awareness and -knowledge gained primarily through relationships to other people and to mastery” (p. 282). Peck also emphasizes the bidirectional nature of relationships—as “ways in which a woman may exert influence upon others and thus receive confirmation of her impact in the

world...[and as] strong influences upon the woman's sense of self" (p. 279). She offers her model, not as a last word on women's development, but as a stimulus to further conversation.

Even though higher education professionals may feel daunted by the vast array of adult development theories, it is critical that they use such theory as a framework for educational programming (Peterson, 1983) and as a basis for designing learning environments attuned to diverse student needs (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Third Age and Productive Aging

Social historian Peter Laslett's (1989) comprehensive treatise on the emergence of the third age is clearly acknowledged by a contingent of other scholars as the foundational work on this relatively recent concept. He attributes the introduction of the term "third age" into English parlance to the establishment of the first British University of the Third Age at Cambridge in 1981, clearly modeled after the French *Les Universities du Troisieme Age* established in the 1970s. Dividing the life course into four ages or eras—immaturity and education, maturity and responsibility, personal fulfillment, and final dependence—is not unique to Laslett's schema (Pifer & Bronte, 1986). That which is unique or "radical" (p. 4) is his avowal of a lack of clear cut age distinction between the eras; in fact, he stresses that the third age of personal

achievement and fulfillment can be experienced simultaneously with the first or the second if the “apogee of personal life” (p. 4) is achieved within those eras.

In practical terms, Laslett realizes that for most individuals—as well as for most societies—the possibility of an era of personal fulfillment hinges on the availability of disposable wealth and the freedom of choice such wealth implies. Hence, the concept of the Third Age has become closely identified in the literature of aging with the age of retirement from mandatory work. For some, it has assumed the status of “an organizing concept that has brought together the potentially disparate debates about work-ending and ageing” (Walker, 1996, p. 3). For others, it has inspired philosophical questions: “If new visions, new values, new states of personal realization emerge in this stage of life, what are the implications for our own and society’s approach to ‘problems of age’?” (Friedan, 1993, p. 31). For a plethora of others, the concept of the Third Age has provided the framework for a spirited discussion of post-employment productivity supported by demographics in which “elders may well constitute our only *increasing* natural resource” (Freedman, 1997, p. 249).

In 1990(a), Moody pointed out that “there is a strange silence in American political discourse about ... the productivity and social contribution of older people” (p. 129). In 1998, the United States Senate’s Special Committee on Aging conducted a hearing on The Graying of Nations: Productive Aging around the World, with testimony offered by an international panel of experts. Gerontologist Robert N. Butler, well known for his correlation between health

and productivity (1985), urged political leaders to eliminate incentives for early retirement and to establish public policies fostering “active ageing by removing existing constraints on life-course flexibility” (p. 46).

Butler and others who espouse productive aging acknowledge an inherent difficulty in the economic connotation of the word “productivity.” Caro, Bass, and Chen (1993) suggest the following, more expansive definition: “Productive aging is any activity by an older individual that produces goods or services, or develops the capacity to produce them, whether they are to be paid for or not” (p. 6). This definition includes both paid and voluntary work, but excludes activities—including formal education—that lead to personal enrichment.

Moody (1993a), definitely concerned by the semantic implication, agrees that productive aging suggests later life that is active, engaged, and contributory in contrast with stereotypical images of decline. But he also suggests caution in establishing productive aging as the only or primary goal of aging. A society grounded in the ideal of productivity is likely to become defeated by its own ideal; when individuals can no longer be productive, they are susceptible to a feeling of uselessness which can breed despair. Moody calls for a more transcendent vision of aging that includes values of “altruism, citizenship, stewardship, creativity, and the search for faith” (p. 38).

Nearly a decade earlier and from a feminist perspective, Friedan (1985) issued an eloquent invitation to envision the third age of life “as a gift, a

promise, a challenge, an opportunity to integrate traditional differences into new qualities which will enable the human species to survive" (p. 104). In an effort to explain gender difference in longevity, she went so far as to attribute the women's movement to the possibilities for productive self-fulfillment presented to women by these same post childbearing, third age years.

With an appreciative nod toward Friedan's contributions to the debate, Roszak (1998) urges abandonment of the vocabulary of productivity in favor of the development of a new form of elderhood grounded in creativity and centered in wisdom. He sees any attempt to attach elderhood to productivity as an attempt to tie it to the values of the marketplace and the cult of youth. "If wisdom means anything, it means the ability to see through the illusions of youth. That is the most liberating aspect of aging. It frees the mind and enlivens the soul. It is the beginning of the great Socratic adventure of knowing ourselves" (p. 109).

The demographics of aging will assure the continuance of the debate just as the heterogeneity and economic needs of the elder population will mandate a variety of opportunities to remain productive. The issue of productive aging is semantically and substantially significant to the consideration of higher education for older adults and thus, to this study. As Moody (1993b) bluntly states, "The most important observation about education for older adults in America is that the enterprise is not serious. Unless we get serious about late-life learning, we will fail to adopt appropriate means to promote productive aging

in the years to come" (p. 221). Even in institutions that boast peripheral programs for older learners, participants are often perceived as consumers of learning and "rarely as capable of productive contributions to society based on the investment in their learning potential" (p. 222). It is the contention of this study that societal support of investment in their learning depends upon recognition of their productive contributions, however those contributions may be defined.

Higher Education's Relationship with Older Adults

As long as the youthful population of the United States continued to provide for expansion in college and university enrollment, higher education was content to remain youth-oriented and virtually uninterested in older clienteles. When demographic projections indicating a decline among youth signaled the end of that expansion, the federal government sponsored Hendrickson and Barnes' research study (1967) which outlined higher education's three-pronged responsibility toward older persons (enumerated in Chapter 1). Special programs developed in the sixties focused on providing "knowledge and skills to cope with the problematic aspects of growing older" (Dickerson, Myers, Seelbach, & Johnson-Dietz, 1990).

In his background papers for the second White House Conference on Aging (WHCOA) in 1971, McClusky's emphasis on a full range of educational needs for older adults—*cop*ing, *exp*ressive, *con*tributive, and *infl*uence—set a

more affirmative tone for programs developed in the seventies. A specific recommendation from the WHCOA (1971) called for the establishment of incentives to attract older adults to educational activities and for the elimination of barriers to access and participation. This social and political endorsement of higher education participation resulted in tuition waiver programs, on-campus noncredit programs such as Elderhostel, and research on perceived barriers to participation (Graney & Hayes, 1976). Cross (1977, as cited in Moyer & Lago, 1987) classified three types of barriers to older adult participation in higher education—situational, dispositional, and institutional. Weinstock (1978) maintained that the removal of barriers for older adults involved “no investment...just sensitive management” (p. 88) of the campus environment.

As the lifelong learning theme gained momentum (Vermilye, 1974) in the United States and as Pierre Vellas’s concept of vital learning in the later years evolved into L’Universite du Troisieme Age in Europe (Dickerson et al., 1990), Moody (1976) criticized higher education for focusing on continuing education, a “branch of market research” (p. 14), instead of developing a philosophical basis for educating older adults. Drawing upon Erikson’s and Jung’s stage theories of adult development, Moody challenged higher education to create a values-based curriculum centered in the self-actualization task of older adulthood.

Leptak (1989) accurately reported that until 1975 most of the literature dealing with older adults and higher education was normative or speculative.

Covey (1980) furthermore maintained that the literature was characterized by “a lack of theory and empirical support” (p. 174). His study, which employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, used role theory as the basis for exploring “the acquisition of a college student role by older people” (p. 173). His findings centered on the student role as a continuation of a role established earlier in life, indicated older learners’ preference for age-integrated classes, and strongly suggested a lack of need to create special courses for this population who found regular course offerings suitable for their needs. These findings help to inform a theoretical treatise published several years later (1983a) in which he describes the inherent dissonance between traditional characteristics of higher education and older persons’ learning needs. He finds higher education’s neglect of their needs tantamount to “cooling them out” (Clark, 1960) of their academic aspirations.

Leptak’s (1989) review of higher education literature, both descriptive and empirical, of the late 1970’s and 1980’s provides a profile of the older adult enrolled in higher education as already well educated (Hooper & March, 1978; Hooper, 1981; Perkins & Robertson-Tchabo, 1981), possessing good health (Papalia-Finley, 1981; Perkins & Robertson-Tchabo, 1981), and financially stable (Hooper & March, 1978; Hooper, 1981). Motivations for enrollment include personal satisfaction and intellectual stimulation (Kingston, 1982; Kingston & Drotter, 1983), with a tendency to choose course work in the liberal arts (Cross, 1982; Covey, 1982). Special support services are not warranted or

expected (Perkins & Robertson-Tchabo, 1981; Kingston & Drotter, 1983). Tuition waivers and the option to audit can actually be perceived as disincentives (Moyer & Lago, 1987), placing older adults in the position of second class citizens—unable to pay fees and unable to perform at the college level. Critiques of fee waiver programs (Long, 1980; Moyer & Lago, 1987) express concern that free tuition to older students also serves as a disincentive to the institution to develop and market special programs for this population.

Leptak reported Chelsvig and Timmerman's (1982) finding, corroborated by Moyer and Lago (1987), that institutions frequently fail to promote the programs they specifically establish for the older adult. As a counterpoint, he describes a successful recruiting program at the University of Nevada-Reno (Gunn & Parker, 1987) in which the university hired six students over the age of 62 to work as part-time recruiters; "in just one semester, enrollment of students over 62 doubled from 68 to 124 and the number of students from age 50-61 also increased" (Leptak, p.109).

Of significance to this study, Leptak noted the scarcity of published qualitative research while acknowledging the value of Brown's (1983) naturalistic "late bloomer" study and Wolf's (1983) study of life review as a means of making meaning through education.

In the 1990's, literature dealing with higher education and older adults has become more self-conscious and more self-reflexive, an integral part of the larger issue of changing enrollment patterns in almost all colleges and

universities (Levine & Cureton, 1998). The demographics of aging, heightened sensitivity to diversity, new models of retirement, and mainstream considerations of adult development (e.g., Sheehy's *New Passages* and *Understanding Men's Passages*) are forcing higher education to confront some difficult questions: "Who should be educated in society, and for what purpose, and who decides who is served, who pays, and whether classes should be age-integrated or age-segregated" (Fischer, 1991, p. 17).

Bass (1990) applies two sociological theories of schooling to the implications of expanding access to higher education to older persons. In the *functionalist* view, schools represent equal opportunity, "a rational mechanism by which the best and brightest rise to the top" (p. 229), the meritocracy concept; schools also develop skills needed for economic productivity in a technological society. Since the functionalist view often incorporates human capital theory, education is perceived as an "investment" made preferably in the young who can generate more capital over a lifetime in the workplace. Older workers, who represent depreciated capital, are given incentives to retire. Functionalists argue that colleges and universities equitably admit older adults, but the relative few who seek degrees evidence the effect of market forces.

Conflict theorists believe that our society is beset by conflict "in which different groups compete for scarce resources—the school being one of them" (p. 232). If more older adults seek vocationally oriented degrees, they will be in direct competition for jobs with younger workers, resulting in an imbalance of

traditional power. In their view, access to higher education will remain “tokenistic” since administrators are aware of the ramifications of contributing to the shift of economic power. Moreover, “those colleges and universities catering to nontraditional students are viewed by their contemporary institutions as being somewhat less rigorous and prestigious than those focusing on the fast-track, high grades, high SAT scores, and athletic youth” (p. 232). Given the impact of both these theories on the political economy, Bass concludes that significant change in higher education’s accommodation of older learners will occur only through a combination of internal and external forces.

Lamdin and Fugate (1997), in a publication sponsored by the American Council on Education, state with impunity: “More older adults would attend colleges and universities if the institutions wanted them to... Current political correctness is confined to gender, class, and race; it does not extend to age” (p. 93-94). Richardson and King (1998), in the *Journal of Higher Education*, readily admit that all nontraditional college students—adults, women, minorities, the disabled—are “subjected to an interactive web of entrenched values from long-standing elitist systems” (p. 67). Attention to the needs of older adult learners is subsumed in a larger trajectory of systemic change mandated by the cultural needs of a global society, digital delivery systems, advancements in cognitive science, and a more individualized relationship between faculty and students (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998).

Less polemical and more pragmatic, Dickerson et al. (1990) offer a decision-making model for older adult participation in higher education built upon Lewin's force field analysis and Germain and Gitterman's ecological analysis. The model demonstrates that "the decision of the older person to participate in credit course offerings and the inclination of the higher education organizations to invite this level of involvement are determined by complex transactions between the older person, the higher education organization, and societal forces" (p. 299). Their discussion of the determination of the educational needs of the older learner recommends the inclusion of qualitative data from the learners "in the form of their reflections and life review" (p. 310).

Leptak (1989) noted the tendency of faculty interested in older adult learners to study the population most accessible to them on their own campuses. Following the same pattern, Scala (1996) surveyed a group of students over 60 at Miami University (Ohio) to expand current knowledge of participation motives and difficulties encountered in an intergenerational campus setting. Significant findings included gender differences in reasons for returning to college and in self-reported academic difficulties. Scala concluded that the results of the study correspond to Kelly's *core and balance model*, with education functioning as a balance activity, helping the older adult to maintain self-esteem and relationships with others during a period of role and goal transition.

Ronald J. Manheimer, individually and in collaboration, has produced a substantial and substantive body of work in the last decade (1989, 1993, 1994, 1995), emanating from his directorship of the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement (NCCR) at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. Realizing that higher education needs to justify specific programming for older adults in terms of value to society, his work focuses on the potential of higher education, in a variety of formats, to develop their leadership potential and facilitate their involvement in community affairs. *Older Adult Education: A Guide to Research, Programs, and Policies* (1995) presents a compendium of national and institutional policies and their effect upon education for older adults.

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) maintain that higher education is “out of synch” (p. 8) with adult students of all ages. Adults approach college as heterogeneous independent agents with multiple roles and responsibilities at home, at work, and in their communities. On campus they often encounter inflexible bureaucracies designed for dependent young adults. In their landmark work entitled *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults*, Schlossberg et al. use transition theory, the theory of student involvement, and the concept of “mattering” as the foundation for a framework of adaptations for adult students. Their comprehensive framework for special services, described under the rubric of *moving in* to college, *moving through* college, and *moving on* [emphasis in original] after college, is particularly applicable to the data generated by this study.

Recent thinking on the provision of career counseling for students of all ages parallels Schlossberg et al.'s rubric in its emphasis on services that span the student's entire college career (Freeman, 1994). In counterpoint, career services personnel have noted a tendency in college seniors of all ages to delay career decision-making (Hansen, 1993, cited in Kroll & Rentz, 1996). Some attribute younger students' reluctance in the 1990's to make career decisions to a cohort tendency "to postpone commitment" (Cannon, 1991). Hansen (1993, cited in Kroll & Rentz, 1996) interprets their inaction to "fear of choosing the wrong path" (pp. 114).

Hansen also advocates a model for career planning that has application throughout the life course and, therefore, greater application to students of all ages. In this model, the traditional question of "What do I want to be?" becomes "'What kinds of life choice experiences do I want to have during my lifetime,' 'Which of my potentials do I want to develop and implement at what stage and with what kind of help,' and 'How can my contributions make a positive difference in this society'" (cited in Kroll & Rentz, p. 114). Career services with a life course perspective, combined with the recent trend to develop programs for special populations (Allen, 1995), suggest that adapting services to the needs of elder adults is within the realm of possibility for the responsive college.

Gardner, Van der Veer, and Associates (1998) also focus on the importance of services for all students in the *moving on* phase of college life in

a major work that lends its name to an entire movement within higher education—*The Senior Year Experience*. Designed to assist students in integrating college experiences gained both inside and outside the classroom, the initiative offers closure to college life combined with preparation for the next phase of life and a new kind of connectedness with the *alma mater*. Mechanisms to achieve these goals include capstone courses, senior seminars, senior projects, and required internships. Despite its emphasis on career preparation for young and middle aged adults, the senior year experience movement acknowledges the importance of post-graduation preparation for all students and provides a model for adaptation to the less vocational, specialized needs of older adults. The outcomes of this study are conceptually related to the “senior year experience.”

While most of the literature discussed in this chapter relates to four-year institutions, the limited role of the community college in the education of older adults is summarized in the oft-cited study by Doucette and Ventura-Merkel (1991). Jointly sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College and the AARP and conducted in 1989-90, the study surveyed all 1224 two-year colleges in the U.S. to ascertain the range and nature of programs designed for older adults. Of the 600 who responded to the survey, fewer than one-quarter had programs and services for older adults. Of those who had programs, the offerings can best be described as practical (e.g., exercise and nutrition; arts, crafts, and hobbies; financial management focused on retirement

and estate planning), providing some justification for the perception that “community colleges have been in the forefront of responding to the practical learning needs of elderlearners” (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997, p. 97). Programs and courses “least likely to be offered were the ones that demographers and analysts would argue are most needed by older adults to adapt to a changing world—that is, skills training for second and third occupations, personal development courses, and a range of health care programs” (Doucette & Ventura-Merkel, 1991, p. 1). Lack of funding was most often cited as the obstacle to designing more innovative and more appropriate programming for the older learner.

The survey results were surprising and disappointing considering that in the mid 1970s, the Administration on Aging had awarded a grant to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges to encourage that organization “to develop an awareness of the needs of older Americans and to explore ways in which these community-oriented institutions might contribute to an improvement in the quality of life in the nation’s elderly population” (Korim, 1974, p. 5).

Issues and Concerns of Educational Gerontology

Educational gerontology, as a “legitimate and academically respectable branch of social gerontology” (Sherron & Lumsden, 1990 p. xiii), has been systematically defined by Peterson (1976, 1978, 1980, 1990) as “an attempt to

apply what is currently known about aging and education in order to extend the healthy and productive years and improve the quality of life for older people” (1990, p. 3). He further specified that educational gerontology includes not only instruction for older people, but instruction about older people and professional education for those preparing to work with older people. Peterson (1980) ascribes the first use of the term “educational gerontology” to a doctoral program initiated in 1970 at the University of Michigan and its first national use in the establishment of the journal, *Educational Gerontology: An International Quarterly*, in 1976.

Even though educational gerontologists readily acknowledge the lack of an empirically based conceptual framework for learning in older adulthood (Wolf, 1994; Withnall & Percy, 1994), they credit Moody (1976, 1985) with an extensive exploration of the philosophy of education for older adults. His four “modal patterns for treatment of the aged”—*rejection, provision of social services, participation, and self-actualization*—reflect society’s evolving attitudes toward them (1976). He particularly challenges higher education to address the psychological and spiritual aspects of aging within the self-actualization mode by designing learning experiences “from which students would emerge as *different kinds of people*, with a new and enlarged sense of value and deepened understanding of who they are...” (p. 15). Such a design requires a leap of imagination made difficult by the inability of both student and teacher to name that which does not exist in the current system.

In a later publication Moody (1985) grounds his philosophy of education in that which makes old age unique among all other stages of life—the experience of aging as time-lived. Drawing upon Henri Bergson’s dual concept of *time-by-the-clock* and *time-lived*, Moody describes aging from the standpoint of time-lived “as the growing probability of loss accompanied by the *possibility* of a growing richness in the quality of experience itself” (p. 30). He acknowledges that this possibility of richness has been called “wisdom” by Erikson, “individuation” by Jung, “self-actualization” by Maslow and even “happiness” by Aristotle. Much effort is expended in our culture, through medicine and technology, to minimize the inevitable losses of aging, but little is done to maximize the potential gains. Herein lies Moody’s challenge of education for the aged—learning opportunities based on “a concept of human development grounded in human finitude but affirming the enduring value of experience in all its forms” (p.46).

More recently, Moody (1990b) has expressed his theory of human experience of time in terms of “*transcendence*: transcendence of the past, transcendence of previous social roles, transcendence of a limited definition of the self” (p. 36). He maintains that education, particularly liberal arts education, facilitates knowledge of the self by examining one’s own experiences in the wider context of life, provides an opportunity to engage in dialogue about those

experiences with oneself and others (i.e., tell one's own story), and leads toward transcendence of previous understanding. This transcendence provides ample justification for education in the later years.

Withnall (as cited in Withnall & Percy, 1994) challenges Moody and others writing in her home country of Great Britain who fail to define old age. She "asks at what point in the life cycle do we begin to engage in dialogue, to reflect on our experience, to accept that our existence is finite, to transcend the past. Since none of us know when we will face death, it might be argued that the process must be lifelong, in which case it has no particular relevance for older people" (p. 21).

Debate also rages between those who espouse critical educational gerontology—education directly related to enabling older adults to gain power over their own lives—and those who favor a humanist approach—learning as a personal venture with the educator as a facilitator in the process, not as an advocate for social action (Withnall & Percy, 1994). As a subset of the larger field of critical gerontology (Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi, & Kastenbaum, 1993), critical educational gerontology advocates the "examination of issues such as the marginalization of older people, structural dependency, poverty, and the stereotyping of older people in relation to aging...[with the intention of] raising people's consciousness about the rights and effective role which older people could play in society..." (Withnall & Percy, 1994). Percy (1990) warns of the danger in homogenizing older people into a group lacking power and raises

serious questions about educators placing themselves in a position of superiority seeking to educate for the express purpose of consciousness raising and social action. He maintains, within a humanistic framework, that learning is the same for older people as for younger people—"a personal quest [in which] the role of the educator is to facilitate the process of learning for the learner, not necessarily to persuade him/her to social action" (cited in Withnall & Percy, p.17).

Recent results of empirical research in the area of cognitive functioning in older adulthood should assuage Moody's philosophical concern for preoccupation with the losses of aging versus the gains. While early "psychometric descriptions of [cognitive] change in persons over the age of 65 presented a picture of deficit" (Wolf, 1994), more recent studies balance biological decrement with intervening effects of lifestyle (i.e., physical exercise, nutrition, medicine) and social history (Labouvie-Vief, 1990). Others demonstrate that older adults develop adaptive strategies to compensate for inevitable biological loss (Labouvie-Vief, 1980).

Baltes' (1993) study focusing on the potential and limits of the aging mind represents the dual nature of contemporary study of mental aging—"gains resulting primarily from culture and losses resulting primarily from biology" (p.580). Losses occurred in memory capacity (*fluid intelligence*) of older persons, but no difference was found between age groups in reality-based problem-solving tests (*crystallized intelligence*). The latter result led to further

inquiry (Baltes & Staudinger, 1993) into the nature and psychology of wisdom, “generally considered the capstone of the human mind...[and] often attributed to elderly persons” (Baltes, 1993, p. 585).

While further research is warranted in cognitive aging, sufficient evidence exists that older adults are “ideally equipped to benefit from continued opportunities to learn and teach and may play critically important roles in societies preoccupied with short term, often short-sighted, planning and values” (Manheimer, 1995, p. 45).

Summary

The literature selected for review in this chapter provides the framework for the study, reflects related areas of scholarship that have enabled the construction of meaning from the data, and situates the outcomes of this research within a broader conversation of collegiate life and learning in older adulthood.

From the literature of adult development, we learn that adults continue to develop throughout their lives, focusing primarily on issues of identity, achievement, autonomy, and interdependence. From the literature on the third age and productivity, we are prompted to ask if it is appropriate to consider late life productivity in economic terms or social terms. From the literature of higher education, we note possible parallels between services for younger undergraduates and their older counterparts—the central focus for this study.

And from the literature of educational gerontology, we are made critically aware of the inconsistency of the undifferentiated language used in education to define old age with the more variegated language used in gerontology. In the current language of age articulated by higher education practitioners, all students over the age of 55 are considered “older adults” for statistical and programmatic purposes. In keeping with this simplified age lens, the Third Age movement in education has readily accepted the designation of everyone over age 60 as residing in the third age of life. By contrast, the field of gerontology discriminates between the young old (55-74 or 65-74, depending on the theorist), the old-old (75-84), and the oldest-old (85+) (Moody, 2000).

Since no other research is known to have asked the particular question of this study—What do higher education professionals need to know in order to help third age students prepare for post-graduate life?—this study contributes a new question to the literature of higher education in older adulthood. It also contributes to an existing body of literature supporting “the senior year experience” movement, while adapting it to the lifestyle of older adults.

The next chapter presents the research design I used to explore my respondents’ experiences in higher education and, for those who have already graduated, their post-graduate experiences.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the post-graduation preparation needs of female college graduates over the age of 60. In order to ascertain these needs, a methodology had to be chosen that would permit the construction of knowledge in an environment that encouraged the participants to “describe their worlds in their own terms” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The research design and methodology were selected to facilitate understanding of the lived experiences of the participants—an understanding that would ground the development of a theory for providing for the post-graduation needs of the 60+ college population.

This chapter will address the philosophical assumptions for the research methodology and the particular inquiry methods used to guide the study. It will begin with a general discussion of the interpretive paradigm to be followed by a description of the research methods and analysis process. The latter will include description of the setting and population; how the data was collected;

the role of the researcher; how data analysis took place; and how trustworthiness was established. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of ethics and limitations of the study.

Philosophical Framework

Any discussion of research methodology must begin with the concept of *paradigm*, defined as “a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world” (Patton, 1990, p. 37). The center of debate among social science researchers since the 1970's, paradigms are of major significance since they represent routine ways of thinking and perceiving that are anchored in assumptions governing every aspect of the research process. “Each model holds a radically different view of the nature of reality, values a different kind of knowledge, and promotes a different set of standards” (Schwandt, 1989, p. 379).

As a researcher, I subscribe to Patton's notion of a “a paradigm of choices” (p. 39) rather than pledging allegiance to a particular “methodological orthodoxy” (p. 39). That is, I believe that the nature of the research question determines the appropriateness of the methodological stance taken toward it. I also believe that “we are attracted to and shape research problems that match our personal view of seeing and understanding the world” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 9). In designing this study, it was important for me to situate it within a paradigm that is field focused, interpretive, attentive to particulars, reliant on the

self as research instrument, reliant on the use of expressive language and the presence of voice in the text, and instructive because of its insight and utility (Eisner, 1998). It was also important to me that this study be situated within a paradigm that recognizes the reality of the participants as subjectively constructed rather than objectively found (Lather, 1986).

As a neophyte researcher intensely interested in participants' lived experience, my imagination has been particularly stimulated by the exhortation of some recognized researchers to conjoin inquiry into experience with artistic expression (Eisner, 1981; Janesick, 1994; Richardson, 1994; Sandelowski, 1995; Janesick, 1998). Influenced by Dewey's posture that art does not exist apart from experience (Dewey, 1934/1980), sensitized to the perceptual impact and linguistic importance of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and convinced that writing *is* "a way of knowing" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516), the epistemological stance I chose had to support the possibility of creative expression of the inquiry's outcomes.

Given the above, I embedded this study in the interpretivist paradigm which emphasizes the complexity of human life to be understood by the researcher through the collection and analysis of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973).

[Thick description] goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person

or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (Denzin, 1989, p. 83, cited in Patton, 1990, p. 430).

The interpretive social researcher seeks to “figure out what events mean, how people adapt, and how they view what has happened to them and around them.... There is not one reality out there to be measured; objects and events are understood differently, and those perceptions are the reality—or realities—that social science should focus on” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 34-35). Since interpretivism emanates from the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics, its concerns center on the construction of reality and uncovering (or, interpreting) the meaning of lived experience itself and the expression of that meaning in written text (Van Manen, 1990).

In harmony with the philosophical traditions of the interpretivist paradigm, the objective of this study was to understand the post-graduation preparation needs of an admittedly limited number of third age college students. The paradigm supports the assumption that each participant’s experience of college is or was unique and that each has or will have constructed a personal reality of college and post-college life—a reality revealed in the textualized expression of specific data gathering techniques. The qualitative data generated in this heretofore unexplored area offers higher education professionals initial insight into the needs of a distinctly different and emerging student population.

Grounded Theory

In a recent publication Cresswell (1998) suggests that qualitative researchers can design more rigorous and more sophisticated studies if they “make informed choices about what qualitative approaches to use in their studies and why they are using them” (p. 4). In his schema the researcher can choose from among five traditions of qualitative research—biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.

A review of each tradition led to the selection of grounded theory for this study for the following reasons:

- **“...the strongest case for use of grounded theory is in investigations of relatively uncharted waters, or to gain a fresh perspective in a particular situation...” (Stern, 1995, p. 30)**
- **“...generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3).**
- **“The importance of this methodology is that it provides a sense of vision, where it is that the analyst wants to go with the research...” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 8).**
- **“The centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied.... This theory, developed by the researcher, is articulated**

- toward the end of the study and can assume the form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypotheses..." (Cresswell, 1998, p. 56).

Justified years ago as appropriate for the study and practice of higher education (Conrad, 1982; Askew, 1983), grounded theory is consonant with the unexplored nature of the topic and lends itself to the development of a theory or model for practice that this researcher hopes to be able to implement and refine over the next decade. Moreover, a value-consonance exists between the strategies of this methodology—which easily blurs “into advocacy and efforts to find solutions to problems” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 13)—and the personal values of the inquirer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1989)—who readily identifies herself as an advocate for older adult learners.

Grounded theory may be defined as “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Data are typically gathered from interviews (20-30) with informants who are specifically chosen to advance the development of a theory in a process called *theoretical sampling*. Analysis of the data is carried on simultaneously or in a “zigzag” fashion, as described by Cresswell—“out to the field to gather information, analyze the data, back to the field to gather more information, analyze the data, and so forth” (p. 57).

The ongoing analysis, called the *constant comparative method*, follows a systematic—and complex—coding procedure that results in the development of

a “theory,” defined by Strauss & Corbin as “a set of well developed categories that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational...phenomenon” (p. 22). In this study, the proposed outcome of data analysis is the development of a framework that might guide higher education professionals in providing post-graduation counseling for the highly heterogeneous population of degree seekers in the third age of life.

Research Design

Population and Setting

For this study I sought a population comprised of two groups of women over the age of 60. In determining an appropriate sample size I followed the guidance of Patton (1990) who maintains that qualitative research lacks rules for determining sample size: “Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 184). I interviewed one group of 9 women in the target age group who are currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program and 11 in another group who have already completed a degree but during the targeted age. This purposeful sampling was designed to elicit rich data from a limited number of persons who can provide credible information since they have lived the research question—and who are willing to share that information.

Access to current students in the target population began with contacting offices of adult admission or continuing education in several four-year colleges and universities in central Ohio. Additional contacts were made with several institutions in the states of New York and Massachusetts known to have programs targeted to third age college students.

Once an institutional contact was made, protocol required submission of a request for permission to solicit participants from the student body. Since the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act prohibited my contacting students directly, I asked continuing education staff to identify female students in the targeted age group and then mailed copies of my information packet to the staff who forwarded them to eligible students. Those interested in participating in the study then contacted me by phone or e-mail.

Identification of former students occurred more informally through personal referral by individuals who knew of my study. For example, the mother of one of my colleagues fit the profile and agreed to participate. I met another while attending the American Society on Aging conference in Orlando in 1998. A presenter at that conference who was teaching a course at a college in Connecticut asked one of her students if she would like to participate and later e-mailed me the student's contact information. I saw the photo of the oldest student in the sample in the local newspaper at the time she graduated and contacted her by phone. "Snowball sampling" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 233) occurred as an early informant, a graduate, provided a lead to a current

student at her alma mater. Another provided a lead to her sister-in-law's sister in another state. Thus it was that in the summer of 2000 I interviewed 20 women in 7 states—Ohio, Kentucky, Florida, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut—who attended 13 different colleges or universities.

To maintain the confidentiality of my research partners, I will not identify them by name nor will I identify their college or university. In a brief profile, I will describe each of them by age, academic major, the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Foundation, 1994) of their institution, the year the current students entered their program or the year the graduates completed their program.

Those who are currently pursuing degrees include the following:

- 63 year old Social Work major, Research I, entered 1991
- 60 year old Human Ecology major, Research I, entered 1995
- 61 year old American Studies major, Baccalaureate I, entered 1998
- 68 year old General Studies major, Baccalaureate II, entered 1999
- 60 year old English major, Baccalaureate I, entered 1994
- 72 year old English major, Doctoral I, entered 1996
- 71 year old Organizational Communications major, Baccalaureate II, entered 1997
- 60 year old Psychology and English majors, Baccalaureate II, entered 1995
- 62 year old Psychology major, Baccalaureate I, entered 1998

Those who had completed degrees at the time of the interview include the following:

- 61 year old Fine Arts/Painting major, Art, Music, and Design, graduated 1999
- 73 year old Gerontology major, Baccalaureate II, graduated 1990
- 76 year old Family Studies major, Research I, graduated 1998
- 83 year old Music major, Doctoral I, graduated 1999
- 60 year old Interior Design/Fashion Merchandising major, Doctoral I, graduated 1999
- 82 year old General Studies major, Baccalaureate II, graduated 1990
- 70 year old English major, Master's I, graduated 1994
- 70 year old American Studies, Master's I, graduated 1999
- 71 year old Library Science major, Baccalaureate II, graduated 1991
- 88 year old Business Administration major, Baccalaureate II, graduated 1999
- 73 year old American Studies major, Baccalaureate I major, graduated 2000

Despite the geographic distribution of the informants and their attendance at diverse types of academic institutions, the sample included a remarkably homogeneous group of women. All were white. All were American born with the exception of one born in England. All but one appeared to be situated socioeconomically in the middle or upper middle class. Health issues

did not appear as a major concern. While several made a passing reference to a health condition and one appeared to suffer shortness of breath, none of the sample complained of ill health nor dwelled upon issues of health. All were married at some time in their lives and are either married now, widowed, or divorced. All spoke of having children. This homogeneity might be attributed to a combination of factors, including cohort effects and the limitations inherent in the snowball sampling technique.

The following tables represent each interviewee's age at the time of the interview, age at the time of most recent entrance into college, and age at graduation or projected age at graduation. The tables illustrate that 90% of the sample entered college and graduated or are expecting to graduate in the age category described by gerontologists as "young old."

Current Students

AGE AT INTERVIEW	AGE AT MOST RECENT COLLEGE ENTRY	PROJECTED AGE/DECADE AT GRADUATION
63	54	60's
60	55	60's
61	59	60's
68	67	70's
60	54	60's
72	68	70's
71	68	70's
60	55	60's
62	60	60's

Table 3.1: Ages of current students at the time of the interview, at most recent entrance to college, and at projected graduation.

Graduates

AGE AT INTERVIEW	AGE AT MOST RECENT COLLEGE ENTRY	AGE AT GRADUATION
61	59	60
73	59	63
76	65	74
83	81	82
60	56	60
82	68	72
70	48	64
70	55	69
71	55	62
88	85	87
73	71	73

Table 3.2: Ages of graduates at the time of the interview, at most recent entrance to college, and at graduation.

AGE BY DECADE	AGE AT INTERVIEW	AGE AT ENTRY	AGE AT GRADUATION
40's	0	1	0
50's	0	10	0
60's	9	6	12
70's	8	1	6
80's	3	2	2

Table 3.3: Ages of all interviewees summarized by decade, showing age at the time of the interview, age at most recent entrance to college, and age at graduation.

Dividing the population into two groups generated some useful data regarding expectations for post-graduate activity as perceived by individuals in both groups, juxtaposed with the actual post-graduate experience of the already degreed population. Asking the in process group to reflect on and articulate their expectations may have provided an impetus for more conscious planning for that group. It may also have indicated whether faculty and advisers have changed advising and post-graduation preparation patterns for older learners in recent years. Involving the two groups enrolled in college over a span of 10-25 years yielded data comparable to those generated by a longitudinal study.

All of the interviews were conducted face to face and at a location preferred by the informant. Most took place at the informant's home, but one occurred at the informant's workplace, another at the campus where she attended college, and another in an unoccupied room provided by the hotel where I stayed while in the informant's city of residence.

Pilot Study

After developing my written instruments and while still identifying participants in the target population, I piloted my interview questions, researcher's techniques, and recording mechanisms with a 55 year old art major about to graduate from the college where I am employed. I purposely sought a student *close to* the age of my target population but not *of* their age, since I had not yet located a sufficient number of women over 60 to participate

in the study. The pilot proved to be critically important, not only to the revision of my interview questions, but to the eventual outcome of the study. The interviewee introduced to me the concept of “after care,” the same concept that later emerged as a key component of my proposal for post-graduation services for third age students.

Data Collection

Data were collected for this study in several different ways: from a written questionnaire designed to prompt the memory of the informant before the in-depth interview; from an in-depth interview with each informant, that was audio-taped; from a focus group discussion intended to encourage conversation between informants in both groups, that was audio- and video-taped; and from a review of college admission documents that might have queried the applicant as to post-graduation plans. Permission was sought—and received—from informants for the audio- and video-taping.

Questionnaire

Asking informants to answer a set of questions in writing prior to the interview evolved from an early discussion with a potential informant who suggested that she might be more successful in searching her memory for

certain details related to her collegiate experiences if she could have questions to think about prior to the interview. (This informant graduated from college in 1991 at the age of 72.)

The questionnaire was designed to generate basic demographic data about the participant, college attended, dates, major, etc., and contained a group of open-ended questions intended to prepare the participant to respond more fully to interview questions. Analysis of responses to the questionnaire assisted in the development of additional or more insightful interview questions.

Individual Interviews

The individual interview conducted with each informant was semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), composed of a series of “highly focused questions that elicit[ed] genuine and relevant responses” (Patton, 1990, p. 309), in an atmosphere of rapport that also allowed the interviewer to “probe” (p. 327) spontaneously for additional detail or clarity. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and a half, emphasizing the need for carefully worded questions and control of the flow of communication by the interviewer. The distant location of most of the informants made follow-up face to face interviews impossible, but each informant was given the opportunity to verify accuracy and clarity of response in a member check of the written script of the interview.

The interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the informants. I took written notes throughout each interview to record immediate responses to

spoken data and to facilitate later reflection on the interview event. The use of and reliance upon these recording mechanisms were not intended to detract in any way from my role/responsibility as the qualitative interviewer to observe and listen. In fact, it was my sensitivity to the meaning of verbal and nonverbal information—combined with the dexterity to guide the flow of the interview—that elevated the interview from a technical process to a “conversational partnership” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 93ff).

Focus Group Interview

Initial analysis of the individual interviews revealed areas of diverse response, even disagreement, stemming from each individual’s perception of the reality of her collegiate experience. Bringing the individuals (who reside in Ohio) from each group together into a focus group for discussion of these particular areas “allow[ed] respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other[s]....producing a synergistic effect that result[ed] in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 16).

Bringing some members from the already degreed group into a focused discussion with some members from the in process group also seemed to stimulate the memories of the degreed group. A discussion of collegiate experience in the past—even in the recent past—juxtaposed with the current experience produced data that lent itself to the development of a framework for

improved post-graduation preparation. Interplay between the groups could have benefited the in process group who still have the opportunity to request improved or additional services from the institution in which they are currently enrolled.

I tried to conduct the focus group in a way that would maximize group compatibility and cohesiveness (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). That objective must have been realized since one of the outcomes of the focus group activity—beyond the generation of rich data for this study—was the desire of the participants to receive a list of all the members' e-mail addresses so they could establish a network of their own for support, socialization, and subsequent learning. I mailed the list to each member two weeks after the focus group activity.

Document Analysis

Application for admission to a college or university usually includes a brief statement or a short essay related to the applicant's reason for seeking higher education or goals beyond completion of a degree ("Where do you see yourself ten years from now?"). Solicitation of such documents from each informant's educational institution was intended to provide me with information regarding the informant's initial motivation in attending college in comparison with evolving motivations and actual post-graduate activity for those already

degreed. I was also hoping that early analysis of the documents would suggest important topics or questions to be pursued in the questionnaire and/or interviews (Patton, 1990).

The limited number of these documents made available served to triangulate some of the interview data. To my surprise, however, their ultimate value lay in the demonstration of their need to be redesigned with different questions appropriate to the life stage of third age students and retained for use in post-graduation planning activities. Analysis devolved from the response to the content of the form to the nature of the form itself.

Role of the Researcher

Many texts dealing with qualitative research characterize the researcher as the “instrument” by which the research is conducted, meaning that the researcher engages *all* of her senses in the research act, is keenly aware of the subjectivity that she brings to the research act, and “is fully conscious of what is taking place in the research project” (Janesick, 1998, p. 62). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) further characterize the researcher as a potential exploiter, intervener/reformer, advocate, and/or friend. The self-reflectivity and awesome sense of responsibility required to engage ethically and effectively in qualitative research are the very qualities that attract me to it, to the personal risk and the potential for increased self-knowledge that its collaborative nature represents.

In preparation for the magnitude of the dissertation project, I established a year long relationship with a 79 year old 1991 graduate of the college where I am employed, whom I had met in the fall of 1997 at a Westminster Thurber Retirement Community learning activity for elderlearners. She readily agreed to participate in my research, answered all of my informal questions, asked for a list of written questions to stimulate her thinking, and is intrigued by my suggestion that we co-author an article for publication in one or more journals for retired persons. We have met for lunch, we have been jointly profiled in her alma mater's/my employer's alumni magazine, we have exchanged copies of publications that might be interested in our potential article, we have exchanged greeting cards, laughed together, and expressed concern for one another. Reciprocity is not difficult to manage with an informant/friend who sends a Christmas card with a handwritten exhortation to "put away your machines and books and enjoy your family over the holidays."

The honor and admiration I genuinely accord to the academic achievements of my research partners and my intense interest in their collegiate experiences equalized any imbalance of power inherent in my college professor/doctoral candidate status. I frequently identify myself as an advocate for adult undergraduates by virtue of my thirteen years of experience working with and for them, so I am conscious of the need to separate my "advocate self"

from my “researcher self” in the data collection and analysis phases. I will need to assume the advocate’s role later in attempting to implement and refine the model or proposal for services that emerges from the data.

With this knowledge of subjectivity residing at the cognitive level, during several of the interviews I found myself making strong empathic statements to the interviewee, beyond the attempt to establish trust or reciprocity. It was during these moments that I first became conscious of the extent of my identification with the situation of my research partners. Less than a decade younger than the 60 year olds in my sample, definitely the oldest in my doctoral cohort group, pursuing an advanced degree at an age perceived as “off-time” in mainstream academic circles, enjoying the process of learning for its own sake more than ever before in my life, resisting and then resenting all the questions about what I will “do with this degree,” and then finally growing increasingly anxious about the “What next?” in my own life—I began to ask myself if it was my identification with their situation that had given rise to the research question, a question that has not occurred to other researchers. Or, if my identification with their situation has evolved as a result of the sensitivity and empathic listening with which I have tried to approach each interview.

Suspecting a combination of these factors at work in my own mental and emotional processes, the realization imposed a responsibility upon me as qualitative researcher to use the sensitivity in collecting and mining the data for analysis while simultaneously refraining from transferring or imposing my own

issues and anxieties upon the data. I believe that, with conscious effort, I have succeeded. The consideration of my own “case” has also suggested a wider transferability of my proposal for post-graduation preparation to adult populations in younger age ranges.

I invited one of my most respected colleagues, who has expressed interest in my research, to engage in peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)) with me. She is a feminist sociologist currently exploring qualitative research methods after years of teaching quantitative methods. We spent an entire day together during the data analysis phase, before I began composing the outcomes chapter. She knows me well and did not hesitate to question either my methodology or my interpretations of the data in the spirit of assisting me to conduct quality research.

I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and interpretation phases as a means of providing data about myself as human research instrument, about logistics of the study, about my methodological decision making and growing insights. At times the journal served well as a sounding board and as a catharsis for the inevitable frustration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that accompanies such an effort. At other times it was difficult to sustain fidelity to the journal, since my full-time employment status resulted in a span of several months between concentrated focus on the components of the study.

Data Analysis

Before collecting my data, my description of data analysis assumed the form of an academic exercise. Paraphrasing Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to the young poet, I expected to "live into" an understanding of the process as my inquiry proceeded.

I have come to understand data analysis as an inductive process that occurs simultaneously with data collection. Bogdan and Biklen describe it as occurring "in a pulsating fashion—first the interview, then analysis and theory development, another interview, and then more analysis...until the research is complete" (1982, p. 68). Marshall and Rossman (1995) divide analytic procedures into five modes: "organizing the data, generating categories, themes, and patterns; testing the emergent hypotheses against the data; searching for alternative explanations of the data; and writing the report" (p. 113). I will attempt to describe my analytic procedures in these terms.

At the level of *organizing the data*, I became intimately acquainted with the contents of the data by reading and rereading interview transcripts, allowing quotes, descriptions, and ideas to circulate (and percolate) through my mind. I considered—and then rejected—the recording of significant chunks of data into a database software program, preferring to establish a data management system on sheets of paper.

I approached the simultaneously technical and creative procedure of *identifying patterns, generating themes, and clustering them* by recording each

woman's response to each interview question on a sheet of paper devoted to that question only. I could then easily review and compare all of the informants' responses to each question. In each phase of analysis I considered separately the set of responses of those who were current students from those who had already graduated. At the same time, I recorded expressions on a similar theme on another sheet devoted to that one theme. By the time I had sifted through each of the 20 transcripts, I had developed an elaborate set of categories and subcategories arranged in a chart-like manner. The visual display of this large quantity of data facilitated the cognitive processing of it and minimized the "tendency to reduce complex information into selective and simplified gestalts or easily understood configurations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11).

The themes and patterns that emerged from the data suggested possible *hypotheses* that I prefer to identify as "explanations" for the phenomena represented in my participants' lived experience. I considered the explanations from a variety of vantage points, *searching for alternative explanations* that "*always exist*" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 116, emphasis in original) and the identification of negative cases (Patton, 1990) that did not fit the proffered explanation. I found this part of the analysis process the most challenging and the most intellectually stimulating as I assumed the stance of detective

"look[ing] for clues that lead in different directions and try[ing] to sort out which direction makes the most sense given the clues (data) that are available" (p. 463).

The data analysis mode took longer than I expected it would take. I delayed the *writing of the research report* until I felt I had thoroughly explored the explanations, even though I knew that the writing process was an indispensable component of the analytical process, "a form of thinking...a way to discover what [I] was thinking, as well as to discover gaps in [my] thinking" (Wolcott, 1990, p. 21). I believe strongly that the very words we choose to document our interpretations, to give meaning to what we have heard and seen, vivify our analytical efforts. And give honor to the lived experience of our research partners. So, I labored over each word and phrase.

Approaching data analysis in terms of *modes* rather than *steps* addresses the nonlinearity of the process in a qualitative study and suggests that it is all at once messy, challenging, intriguing, and rife with ambiguity (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Thus, the nature of the process heightens the importance of including measures in the research design to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Trustworthiness Issues

Within the philosophical framework of the study, I interpret its trustworthiness to "pertain to the degree that [the] method investigates what it is

intended to investigate” (Kvale, 1996, p. 238) and that its findings “are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). To these ends, its design includes the verification criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln in *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985) and supplemented by Lather in her article, “Research as Praxis” (1986).

The first criterion, *triangulation* of data collection methods, serves as “a means of checking the integrity of the inferences” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 163) drawn from the data. Its central idea is the corroboration of evidence collected from several different sources or perspectives to illuminate an emerging pattern or theme. In this study, triangulation was accomplished by the use of the written questionnaire, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis of college application forms.

The second criterion, *peer debriefing*, involves the establishment of an ongoing relationship between the researcher and a trusted colleague in which the researcher can articulate evolving theory and rely upon receiving both support and challenge. The debriefer acts not only as a sounding board, but also as a ramrod, pushing the boundaries of the researcher’s thought process to ensure that all aspects of the inquiry have been addressed. For this study my peer debriefer will be a respected and trusted colleague, a sociology professor, regularly engaged in the teaching of research methods, recognized for academic rigor, interest in feminist issues, and her natural affinity for the role of devil’s advocate. Moreover, she has a wonderful sense of humor.

The third criterion, *member checking*, is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). It involves taking back to the participants the transcriptions of interview data, evolving interpretations, and—at the end of the analytical process—conclusions drawn from the data so that they can comment upon and react to the accuracy of the researcher’s work. Depending upon consensus or lack thereof, the participants’ responses may become additional data. Schwandt (1997) points out that member checking may be more of an ethical procedure than an epistemological one, given that the respondents have expended their time and shared details of their lives with the researcher. As my study evolved, I offered participants the opportunity to read and offer corrections/additions to written transcripts of their interviews. While the desirability of in person or group member checks of interpretations and conclusions is noted in the design of the study, the time frame within which I was obligated to analyze the data and complete the writing prevented members’ review of the findings. Since each of them will receive a copy of the complete dissertation, I will seek their responses to the findings for incorporation into a follow up study or article.

A fourth technique for establishing trustworthiness is the researcher’s maintenance of a *reflexive journal* throughout the entire research process. In the journal the researcher is encouraged to reflect upon personal bias brought to the study, upon personal reactions to what is happening during the course of the study, and upon patterns/themes emerging from the data. Since the

researcher is considered to be the research instrument in qualitative studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) liken the reflexive journal to data about instrumentation often found in quantitative studies. For this study, fidelity to the reflexive journal was at the same time difficult and critical, since the processes of data collection and analysis were carried out on a “part-time” basis over an extended period of time.

The fifth criterion of trustworthiness, *catalytic validity*, refers to the potential of the research process to alter the participants’ reality to such a degree that they are empowered to change that reality in some way (Lather, 1986). This research designed to explore the third age college student’s post-graduation preparation includes the possibility of an increase in self-understanding and self-determination that might result in the participants petitioning their educational institution for additional, improved, or at least, more age-appropriate guidance in post-graduation planning.

The sixth criterion of *rich, thick description* (Geertz, 1983) refers to the transferability of research results made possible, not by the researcher’s claims of broad application or generalizability, but by the researcher’s inclusion of sufficient detail to enable readers to transfer these results to other contexts. Thus, the responsibility falls upon the researcher in the design phase to develop questions intended to solicit rich, thick description and to use purposeful sampling techniques to identify respondents able and willing to yield rich, thick description. The responsibility further falls upon the researcher in the reporting

phase to transform the rich, thick description into riveting “stories” that might captivate the reader and “facilitate the transferability of the theory developed with the participants in the study to the broader field of higher education” (Dougherty, 1992, p. 94).

The last sections in this chapter will address the ethics of qualitative research and the limits of the study.

Ethical Issues

Recognizing that in qualitative research most concern for ethical behavior “revolves around issues of harm, consent, deception, privacy, and confidentiality of data” (Punch, 1994, p. 89), I have approached this study with sensitivity to the rights of the participants. To that end, I took the following steps:

- At the first point of contact with a potential participant, I emphasized the *voluntary nature* of her participation, provided as much detail as I could about the purpose and nature of the study, offered an estimated time commitment, and suggested a full range of possible uses for the data collected. I encouraged the asking of questions and presented myself as receptive to any expressed concerns about the nature of the study or participation in it.
- Prior to taping (audio and video) any individual or focus group interviews, I presented participants with a written consent form

indicating knowledge of the recording, its intended use in the collection of data, and my commitment to maintaining their *confidentiality*. The difficulty of protecting identity in a video environment was addressed as a separate but serious concern. I also offered the option of turning off the audio tape recorder during an individual interview if the participant chose to comment “off the record.” I explained that transcriptions of all interviews would be provided to participants for verification and clarification. I assured the participants that I am the only person who will listen to the tapes unless they give specific permission for others to do so.

- I addressed the issue of *reciprocity* as directly as I could at the outset of the study, expressing to the participants my indebtedness to them for their willingness to contribute their experiences and their time to “our” study, pledging to acknowledge them as co-researchers and co-creators of the knowledge and proposals that emanate from the work. I presented each of them with a small token of appreciation when I arrived to conduct the interview and each focus group participant received another gift at the conclusion of the group discussion.

Aware that the nature of qualitative research often gives rise to unanticipated ethical issues, I remained alert to the possibility throughout the study, but encountered none.

Limits of the Study

The study was limited to a small sample of women within a particular age group, who have attended or currently attend higher education institutions in the midwestern and northeastern parts of the United States. While racial and socioeconomic homogeneity were not objectives of the study, all of the participants are white and all but one are financially secure.

While recognizing that college personnel who recruit and provide service to third age students might make important contributions to the discussion of this population's post-graduate needs, a decision was made to ground this study exclusively within the reality of the students.

The fact that this study is asking an apparently *new* question related to the undergraduate education of third age adults was both limiting and liberating—limiting in that it has no existing body of work upon which to build and liberating in its potential to generate a Pandora's box of questions for higher education to explore in the first decade of this new millennium.

Summary

In this chapter I have situated the research in a methodological framework consistent with the aims of an interpretive study designed to understand the post-graduation preparation experiences and needs of third age undergraduate women. I have discussed methods used for data collection and analysis and have described techniques used to assure the trustworthiness of

the data and its interpretation. I conducted the study as an ethical researcher committed to integrity and concern for the welfare of my research partners. Throughout the study, I remained keenly aware of its limitations and grew steadily hopeful of its possibilities.

The stories shared in the next chapter have made it all worthwhile.

CHAPTER 4

PLANNING FOR POST-GRADUATION LIFE

In this chapter I explore the data related to post-graduation planning gleaned from my research participants' written questionnaires and from my face to face interviews with them. The following themes emerged from the data:

- post-graduation planning as a function of my research partners' initial motivation for entering college during the third age of life,**
- their post-graduation plans at entry and changes that occurred along the way,**
- the building of relationships related to the planning process,**
- the continuum of life experience as key to the planning process,**
- the need for discernment processes to facilitate post-graduation planning, and**
- the participants as talented women in transition.**

Just as I conducted the interviews by listening with both head and heart, I now endeavor to echo their voices from the same stance. In reliving the interviews via transcript review, I have become keenly aware of the level of their trust and their desire to tell their stories so that other women in their age cohort

might be encouraged to attend college and benefit from improved services resulting from their experiences. My respect and reverence for their aspirations and their attitudes toward learning have elevated this task from the academic to the sacred. I am their most willing messenger and their most committed collaborator.

Motivation for Attending College in the Third Age

My informants' reasons for entering or, as in many cases, re-entering college reflect the results of other motivation studies—something they have always wanted to do and now have the time to do, unfinished business that needs to be tended to at this time of life, something missed in youth, a lifelong dream that developed over the years, the need for enrichment, the desire to stretch the intellect or broaden horizons, a yearning to pursue a calling recognized in childhood but unfulfilled until now. For several, formal study represented a purposely sought distraction—from the sorrow of a husband dying from multiple sclerosis, from a preoccupation with the condition of a son rendered paraplegic in an accident, from complicated business affairs, and from becoming too involved in the personal business of married children.

Narratives of early life suggest that most of these women were “smart girls” (Kerr, 1994) who loved school, academically or artistically talented, with aspirations for higher education or careers traditionally open to women (teaching, nursing) in the eras of their youth. Only one identified herself as a

“late bloomer, a party person” in high school. The Depression, World War II, or the 1950’s social priority for women of marriage and children either dashed their hopes for a college education or deflected their attention from college to business school and/or work until the advent of marriage and children. Those who attended college for a year or two experienced an interruption caused by circumstances beyond their control—familial, financial or personal.

The decision to enter college for the first time or to return to finish a degree at this time of life was made completely autonomously or in consultation with husband or children, but never in the spirit of asking permission. For some, “doing it on my own” was a critical factor as was the realization that “only I can make this happen.” One who needed a single semester of study to graduate from the college attended in her youth made the decision on her own to do so, but needed the support of her extended family to carry out the decision, since she lived a thousand miles from the college. Her husband’s brother arranged room and board for her with his daughter who lived within driving distance of the school.

Two current students cited Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as influential years ago in fueling the flame of their desire to return to college. The older of the two, now 68, read the book soon after its publication and subsequently visited the local university to explore matriculation. Returning home from campus, “I took one look at my household and my [five] little children, and I said, ‘Nope. This isn’t the time.’” Twenty-nine years later, after

retiring from work, she entered a community college to begin her studies. The other Friedan fan, now 60, read the book in 1975 and again recently, calling attention to the chapter entitled “Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available.” She made time for school in her already busy life by “keeping things simple and consolidating a lot of things you’re spending too much time on, and taking a good chunk for school.”

While the desire to enter college had lurked in the back of their minds for years, the act of seeking admission was often precipitated by a specific occurrence—a divorce, an inheritance or an insurance settlement that provided tuition funds, the need for structured activity soon after retirement, a secretarial job on campus that offered free tuition as a benefit, or a good friend taking it upon herself to call the college and arrange for the admission interview. In other instances, genetic considerations prompted enrollment. A 60 year old respondent’s parents suffered dementia in their later years and her sister is already institutionalized with Alzheimer’s disease, so for her, higher education signifies healthy brain stimulation. The longevity of another respondent’s 94 year old father suggested to her at age 60 that she could possibly live another 35 or 40 years, so completing her education in her 60’s represents sound planning for the next trimester of life.

Almost half the informants addressed a college degree as increasing their status, either at work among other employees who have degrees or in their own families where they are now accorded more credibility during discussions

and arguments. Several mentioned that their husbands, children, and many of their friends all have degrees, leaving them feeling outside the credential circle. Several identify themselves as the only members of their book discussion group who lack a college degree, so they perceive acquiring one as a social advantage. Others recognize the degree as contributing to earning power or providing “clout” after working many years without a formal credential. One informant has held jobs she disliked intensely, so the degree represents her “step ladder” to work that is truly meaningful. Upon graduation, another expects to shed the feeling of inferiority that she has long felt around college graduates.

Informants made frequent reference to an increase in self-confidence, self-worth, self-esteem, or validation that results from “meeting the challenge” and finding out that “I can do as well as anybody else.” Some mentioned a more specific self-confidence in writing ability, in doing research, and in organizational skills.

Assertive and self-demanding as learners, these women reveal themselves as poets and philosophers when describing their response to this long-awaited opportunity for college study. Going to school is “a journey,” “an adventure,” “a hobby,” “an impossible dream,” “icing on the cake of life.” Study is “a hunger,” “my opiate,” “a giant door to the rest of the world.” Campus is “a magical place” and learning is “the way to be.” *Amen.*

Plans at Entry and Changes along the Way

For most of the population, the consideration of life after college bore little to no importance at entry. They marshaled their energies to meet the academic and logistical challenges inherent in their decision to enter school and focused on the present in order to excel in the classroom. In the group of 11 that have already completed degrees, the 7 oldest in the group admit to having no plan at entry for life after college. Consistent with their motivation for seeking the degree, the joy of learning or bringing closure to an unfinished task served as its own reward and represented no need for an instrumental goal beyond the degree.

The other four who completed the degree in their early 60's had motivations both expressive and instrumental—fulfilling a lifelong dream *and* changing careers. The gerontology major entered college with an interest in developing a curriculum for use in retirement planning and ended it wanting a job more directly related to her field of study. The art major who had worked successfully in real estate for 30 years sought to change her occupation from an “analytical one—real estate—to a more creative one—painting.” The interior design major had worked all her life in office jobs that held no satisfaction, so the degree represented the opportunity to move “up” into more gratifying employment. The library science major had become bored in her job with a magazine publisher and looked toward part-time reference work in librarianship for more intellectual stimulation.

The group of 9 current students, with 7 in their 60's and 2 in their 70's, present a different pattern. One third of them gave no thought at entry to life after college, although the oldest expressed interest in the publishing field, "but it's too late for me now." Another is convinced that she will be "better prepared for whatever I want to do" and summarizes her philosophy as the slogan on the bag of the college bookstore: "Education is not preparation for life; it is life itself." The other lives one day at a time, mindful of her age at the time of degree completion, and concerned about protecting herself from disappointment lest a post-graduation plan should go awry.

Another third of the group entered school with the intention of writing for publication after graduation. One of them combined her interest in social issues with a degree in social work so that she can write about important social issues from an informed point of view. Another who writes fiction interrupted her college curriculum to take a summer course in creative writing at the local community college in order to hone her writing skills simultaneously with completing degree requirements. The third realized midway through sophomore year that "I had enough building blocks to do what I wanted to do—write. Now it's something I *need* to do."

The remainder of this group is job or career oriented. One with management skill developed during 17 years in real estate wanted to transfer these skills from administration of a multi-office firm "to a field that I would find more rewarding," such as administration of a care facility for the elderly, but

found that “anything commensurate with my experience in management required a bachelor degree.” One intends to remain in the same field, early childhood education, but would like to move upward into a policy making position. Another has achieved success in architectural design without a formal credential and continues to search for a new field that will challenge her and maintain her interest.

Planning for life after college was not important to the majority of informants at the point of entry and remained unimportant for those in their 80’s and for a few others. But the situation changed for some along the way. In one instance, planning focused on career change became less important when the student “recognized the breadth of what I might have the opportunity to participate in and what might feed me in addition to the limited idea I had at the beginning....It’s [become] a big world for me.” For another, the importance increased with the selection of social work as her major: “I just can’t wait until I’m able to get out of here and make a difference in one way or another because...there’s such a wide variety of things that you can do with that major.” Still another speaks of becoming more “passionate” about her plan to continue working—she’s 71 now—and write for publication as a result of receiving good grades and positive critiques on her essays and papers.

The optimism of those who are currently pursuing degrees is notable, particularly when juxtaposed with a few of those who have completed degrees and now speak from a different vantage point. A 73 year old recent graduate

who has never worked outside the home articulates disappointment at the point of completing her degree that there is no way that she can now pursue a career. "People constantly say to me, 'What are you going to do now?' I have no answer for them. I could go back and study some more, but I think to be able to do something with it, it's probably...not in the cards....At least I haven't found it yet." Later in the interview, she made the astute observation that the issue is really not "job opportunities, it's utilizing your skills in a new way."

The library science major who graduated ten years ago at age 61 claims not to have engaged in serious planning for life after college while in school. She has not sought paid employment since graduation and volunteering in public libraries has not proved satisfying or intellectually stimulating. She readily admits that if she had it to do over again, she would choose a major in the humanities, "taking more music courses, more art-related things—things that would connect better with travel and with the free time you have to go to plays or concerts."

The 72 year old gerontology major who graduated at age 63 explains with great animation that she did no planning for life after college, but that by the time she neared the end of her program, she wanted to pursue a job in her field. She had no academic adviser, the college's career counselor bluntly stated to her and others in the major that there were no job opportunities in their field, and after considerable frustration, she sought assistance from a career counselor at another college where her husband was employed. She

eventually secured a position as director of a senior center, a position she held for two years until retiring along with her husband. She now regrets retiring and expresses great interest in developing a curriculum designed to help others prepare for retirement more thoughtfully than she did.

These data indicate that students in the third age, particularly those in their 60's and early 70's, enter college focused upon the task at hand—enjoying the learning opportunity so long awaited, meeting self-imposed high standards of performance, completing the degree—while giving little consideration to post-graduate life or future activities. This approach to college and life afterwards suffices for some, particularly those in the 8th decade of life, but for others in the 6th and 7th decades of life, frustration and dissatisfaction are likely to surface during the post-graduate transition.

One who graduated at the age of 71, who had always been active, and who readily admits the frustration she experienced, commented, “I am sure that I had been doing this for my own benefit, but I had never thought of what a vacuum I would be creating when school was over....It was something I thought would fall into place.” A 73 year old interviewed 3 months following graduation stated, “I’m sorry that I don’t have something that’s more interesting for me to do to get me out with people, and doing things that are intellectually stimulating, but I’ll find some volunteer thing to do.” The same informant wrote the following on the sheet of questions sent in advance of the interview: “I would like to see more opportunities for older women to go on to more productive lives after they

graduate.” A 70 year old who graduated at 69 and then retired a year later from gainful employment realizes that it has just now become important to her to “use what I’ve learned in college...whereas before it was just finishing and proving to myself and my family that I could do this.”

A 60 year old interviewed a few months following graduation allowed herself the summer months to rest and regroup before seeking a position in the interior design field. She addressed the issue of fear faced by women in this age group who graduate and then have to go into “this real world” and apply for jobs. She sees a great difference between functioning in a classroom and going into the workaday world, and avers that “a lot of people avoid that part of afterwards....I am not going to allow that to happen to me....We have to get over this fear of rejection.”

All of these comments suggest that for many older female graduates “commencement” of a productive and satisfying life after college may become a nonevent without an interim step or process. The experiences of these informants also suggest that *readiness* to engage in the process or *openness* to the process is likely to occur within a few months to a year following graduation. Celebration of reaching the long desired goal is frequently followed by a period of “catching up” with family, friends, travel, and housework followed by the realization that whatever engagement will come next may not be falling naturally and effortlessly into place as was optimistically expected. When

completion of the college experience and retirement from employment occur simultaneously or in close proximity, the sense of loss and confusion can double.

In addition to drastic changes in activity levels, when the pace of life suddenly slackens, the graduate has time to reflect on who she has become, what she now has to offer to society, how she looks on a resume. One graduate referred to McAfee's book about Bill Bradley, *A Sense of Where You Are* (1965), in which he uses Bradley's technique for achieving success on a basketball court as a metaphor for maintaining balance and direction in life. She said, "I have yet to acquire a sense of where I am." And later in the interview, "I didn't feel as though I knew who I was now that I was educated."

That the educational experience has transformational implications cannot be denied. A current student who speaks euphorically of her college opportunity to develop her potential, asserts that she is "constantly charming myself with my new sense of self" and wonders "how did they do that to me?" One of the 80-something graduates has a new perspective on life: "Maybe you thought you lived your life to the fullest, and maybe you didn't. And now that you've learned more, and especially as I learned about cultures, about the whole world, appreciate, you really appreciate where you are. And if ever you can do anything, do it." Another who participated in Glee Club and joined a committee to raise money for the senior class, found excitement in deliberate interaction with diverse populations on campus: "There were people of different

racess and from many nations. I learned a lot about homosexuality... about how people of color feel.... To me that's an important part of a college experience." And in another's words, "that paradigm has been stretched."

Older graduates with a new sense of self, a new appreciation for the diverse world around them, new knowledge, new skills, and potentially new aspirations understandably experience a period of disequilibrium at the point of formal disengagement with the academic institution. Whom do they perceive as best qualified to walk with them through the State of Confusion and into the Realm of What Next? This question is best explored through a discussion of relationships with college personnel and others in a position to assist the older graduate plan for life after college.

Relationships That Facilitate Planning

During each face to face interview I directed a series of questions to both groups—degree holders and those still in process toward the degree—designed to elicit the frequency, level and tone of discussions with others about post-graduate plans. I phrased the questions to include advisers, other college personnel, classmates, family, and friends. I based this line of questioning upon the assumption that every student was assigned an academic adviser in her chosen major or area of study. I soon learned that my assumption was incorrect. Several current students and two graduates had no assigned academic adviser and one who graduated 10 years ago had been sent to the

academic dean for registration advice because Continuing Education personnel “did not know how to handle my student situation.” In some colleges Continuing Education personnel remain advisers to returning students regardless of age, even after they have declared a major.

Among the current students, only 3 of the 9 have thus far engaged in conversations about post-graduation planning with those whom they identify as advisers. Of those 3—all in their early 60’s—one has been most assertive in discussing her career plans with her adviser, with a professor in her major, with the dean of the program for returning students, and with personnel in the Career Development Office. Another had recently been encouraged by her adviser to enter the Honors Program and went on to explain that “I really haven’t taken advantage of any adviser because I make my own decisions, for good or bad.”

The third student who answered in the affirmative attends a college where the director of Continuing Education is her assigned adviser, a situation that does not meet her needs. After informally discussing her dissatisfaction as an advisee with an English professor during a class trip to the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare Festival, she was urged by the professor to find a faculty member interested in mentoring her. She has done that, having identified a female professor in each of her 2 majors willing to serve as her mentor. Her comment upon this state of affairs: “They’re saying that you have to find

someone that will help you, and I guess I thought it should be different. But I guess it's not any different than the rest of life. You just have to find your own support group and... fend for yourself."

Her cohort at the same college has not sought a mentor, but continues to meet with the director of Continuing Education only to complete registration procedures. When she told him of her long-term goal to write for publication, he responded, "Well, that's wonderful." Her comment to me: "So that's about it. I don't get much encouragement about things like that, because it seems like such a pipe dream.... I just want to do what I want to do."

Another student who has not discussed post-graduation plans with her adviser may do so at a later date, but for now, when she asks him about things like course selection, he usually says, "You know what you want to do. Sounds like you've got a pretty good handle on it." The student mentioned earlier, who prefers not to make plans lest they go awry and result in disappointment, maintains that her adviser understands her "one day at a time" approach and has not broached the topic of post-graduation planning. "It's quite nice. We kind of understand each other really well." Several more who are current students and who have not discussed long-term plans with an adviser are considering approaching a favorite professor—usually another woman—to discuss an idea.

One member of the group of students who already hold degrees was my own advisee during her college career that ended ten years ago. During the

interview, she and I tried to recollect together what conversations we had had regarding her post-graduation plans. We agreed that we had talked about it during meetings at registration time, primarily in the last year of her studies. When I asked a standard question about her plans, she indicated that she was considering working part-time in retirement. I did not perceive concern for the future on her part and backed off, thinking, "Well, she's not concerned about it. Therefore, it's probably not my role to push anything." Her response to my recollection: "That's probably true."

Two other degree holders who returned to college to complete only one or two remaining semesters of coursework did not discuss plans with an assigned adviser, both of them mentioning how busy or overworked the advisers appeared to be and they didn't want to bother them. One of these students still corresponds with a favorite professor from that same college whom she met when a student in the 1980's. The former professor is now in her 70's and living in another state, but it is her counsel that she prefers to seek by mail.

Several other degree holders had conversations with professors or advisers in which they were encouraged to pursue graduate studies by virtue of their excellence as students and their appreciation for the learning process. The only member in the sample who actually enrolled in a master's degree program directly following graduation from college happens to be the oldest; at 88, a short time after graduating, she entered a master of religious studies

program through the Catholic Distance University in Hamilton, Virginia. Her undergraduate adviser had earlier called to her attention that with an education she would be able to talk on a different level with her educated children. She has found this to be true—and extremely satisfying.

One of those encouraged by her adviser to pursue graduate studies considered the cost and the commute to the university's location and decided to explore other possibilities closer to home. Her return to college was made as a snap decision, so she is proceeding with greater caution this time "to make sure that's what I want to do rather than go jumping into something again." Another graduate had been encouraged by several of her professors to pursue a master's degree "because they thought I could use it some day. I have never been clear on that, how anybody my age [76 now, early 70's when in school] could use a degree." Her 50 year old son continues to encourage her to seek advanced studies. She is, in fact, taking a course from the university to prepare to become a tutor of school age children, noting that earlier in life, she had wanted to become a teacher.

Another degree holder interviewed one year after graduation spoke in glowing terms of several professors who encouraged all their students to seek more education and who also distributed information regarding careers for those with majors in history or art. Having just retired, she is now considering a master's degree, well aware that in the state in which she resides, third agers can do so for free.

After ascertaining the limited role played by the assigned academic adviser in discussing post-graduate plans, I asked the students in both groups to identify who would be *best suited* to help them think about and plan for life after college when they felt like talking about it. Even though the majority of current students have not yet engaged in such discussions, they mentioned professors in their major or the professor of a course they have found personally meaningful or a combination of academic adviser and interested professor. Two mentioned staff members of college programs for returning adult students. Several named family members and 2 included close friends among a list of possible persons.

Those with completed degrees proffered answers laced with less certainty. Two mentioned educated children and another mentioned a list of family members either deceased or living far away and perceived as inaccessible for such dialogue. One listed a couple of favorite professors in her area of study, but qualified her answer with this concern: "Sometimes I think that people in academia are not in the real world. I think they are in their world at the university....I think it should be someone who has perhaps been out and is coming back, like the fellow who had been in industry... and wants to teach. Those were the best." Another expressed interest in talking with her former adviser who directed the Weekend College Program she enjoyed so much, "but she is really bogged down with the present students....I would have to seek someone out and find out which direction I should take." Another admitted

having no idea whom to consult, eliminating her family because “they’d just as soon I didn’t do anything. They want me to go back and live the life that I have...just being interested in them.” She hesitates to contact anyone at her alma mater “because I have so many restrictions as to what I can do.” Two others specifically said that they could think of no one at their respective schools to contact and another asserted that “there is nobody I can discuss my life or my pursuits with except my cat...they are just not interested.”

These answers provide significant insight into the plight of the older graduate who does not recognize the need to plan for life after college prior to graduation or who feels unable to invest energy in that process until completing the degree. For some, a satisfying post-graduate life does not naturally “unfold” as expected or an initial plan expires soon after graduation with a decision to retire. The exhilaration of fulfilling the lifetime dream to acquire a college education can be quickly superseded by a desire to put new knowledge and skills to use in some way. Those who would like to seek the counsel of trusted college personnel articulate sensitivity to the fact that faculty and staff “are busy and part of their workload is not to be available to me now that I’m a graduate.”

This last point must represent the linchpin of any model for post-graduate planning to emanate from this research. These older adult graduates did not perceive college personnel as available to them for advice or counseling after graduation—when they realized they needed it. In my admittedly limited sample, this perception does not seem to vary between students attending

colleges having special programs to support returning students and those who have no such programs. While the 7 informants who attended or currently attend colleges with special programs speak in glowing terms of the many facets of support offered them from admission through the completion of the academic program, none of them was cognizant of or referred to post-graduate counseling tailored to their unique situations as third age students. Those in the total sample who discussed life after college with advisers, professors, or staff spoke most often of being encouraged to “go on” to graduate study, just as younger adults might be encouraged, without consideration of the implications for their age group.

My query regarding discussions with classmates revealed that most of the informants did not discuss their own plans with their younger classmates although many of them had discussed the younger students’ plans and had offered them encouragement either in a job search or in seeking admission to graduate school. Two asserted that they did not get close enough to classmates to take part in informal conversations on any topic. One who graduated 10 years ago maintained that the younger students avoided her, a situation she “considered a form of discrimination.” In another part of the interview, however, she related with good humor that a 19 year old boy asked her after class one day if she really thought she’d be able to get a job after finishing school.

The second oldest respondent in her early 80's said that the younger students teased her about her post-graduation plans, good-naturedly revealing their curiosity. She tried to think of a "witty" retort, entirely in keeping with her personality. The oldest respondent answered that she had discussed her plans with younger adult students only in the context of a class assignment to write a paper "projecting where your career would be 20 years from now." In her paper she reviewed all of her earlier family, financial, and travel goals, declaring that she'd met them. "The only thing left is the education, and I'm working on it." When she read her paper aloud, it merited a round of applause.

Only two responded enthusiastically in the affirmative to have discussed their plans with classmates. The 60 year old informant, who had earlier described herself as a "party person" in high school and a "late bloomer," developed a full blown camaraderie with the young cohorts in her interior design major. They invited her to sorority parties, she took a trip to Europe with them, she has attended their weddings, and invited them to her home for spaghetti suppers. She explained her unique relationship with them in this way, "I essentially hung with the younger students. I think there was not a problem with that because I've had children. I'm kind of a young thinker..."

Another informant, 61 years old, discussed her plans with a 21 year old senior with whom she had experienced an epiphany in the value of cross-generational learning. In an advanced American Studies class, she was having great difficulty reading a contemporary novel in which the author "doesn't even

put his words on the page in paragraphs.” When she mentioned her difficulty to her young classmate—who *loved* the book—it eventually dawned on her that the younger student’s positive reaction was grounded in “the way that she assimilates information in sound bites and videos.” They ended up sharing their papers with each other, letting the professor in on this momentous realization, and spending a whole class session discussing the generational dynamic. At the end of the academic year, it seemed quite natural for her and her young classmate to discuss their career and life plans.

These exchanges suggest that *some* cross-generational interaction takes place naturally when older and younger students associate on campus, but not enough for all to benefit in a reciprocal fashion. One current student at a large university expressed the feeling of being “ostracized” from her younger classmates. Several participants commented upon the difference between younger and older students’ motivations for attending college—getting a job vs. getting an education—and the lack of understanding on the part of the young as to why the old *choose* to attend school. An increase in the number of elders on campus offers both student affairs and academic affairs personnel a golden opportunity to address lifelong learning as critical for personal development as well as career development.

During the interviews another type of relationship emerged that seems to have influenced both the personal and career development of a substantial number of my interviewees. Some of them used the term “mentor” in a variety

of contexts or described a relationship that I perceived as mentoring, calling my attention to the potential significance of mentoring in the older adult's educational process and in post-graduation planning.

In several instances, informants attributed their college attendance to the encouragement of an older, educated woman who recognized their potential. A 60 year old speaks with great affection of a 76 year old friend with a Ph.D. in early childhood education who was instrumental 5 years ago in her entering school: "She kept telling me, 'You've got to get a degree... you've got to go to school.' Every quarter she'd ask me, 'Are you going next quarter? What are you taking?' ... So I said I just cannot quit after 2 years. She would never hear of it." Her mentor now suffers from dementia and the student visits with her every Sunday to allow her husband-caretaker a break. But the echo of the mentor's voice still keeps her going under some difficult circumstances.

Another 60 year old, who refers to herself as "timid," has explored possible post-graduation plans with an older friend she identifies as a mentor: "She's 67, so she gives me a lot of insight into what I might feel like when I'm 67 or 68, and she's doing fine. She's given me a little push... 'You might as well go for your master's.'" Later in the interview, the informant refers to 2 other older women who were members of her ethnic community in which she always felt like a misfit because she wanted more out of life than the role of wife and mother that this community expected. One of these women, in her 90's, now

lives in a nursing home; the other has passed away. "They were also misfits, but we always found each other. It was wonderful to have them, and we tend to find each other."

A respondent in her 70's who graduated 10 years ago offers this advice to others in her age group who return to college: "They should find a mentor, or an adviser...who will appreciate what you're doing from your perspective, not from their perspective, and [realize that] it's a process....Allow that person to know who you really are inside....Trust yourself to talk."

The current student discussed earlier in this chapter, who was advised by her English professor to find a mentor when she spoke of her discontent with an assigned adviser, attributed her success in the business world without a degree to a mentor who "taught me the position and the skills that would now [require] a college education." Her favorable experience with a mentor in the workplace predisposed her to embrace the suggestion to find faculty mentors and to choose them carefully: "I personally selected them to make sure my personality and theirs fit. I wanted to make sure they wanted to mentor an older person or me, specifically." Having frequently referred to college as "the opening of doors to the rest of the world," she relishes this mentor relationship with faculty because "they know where the doors are that you need to open."

Others in the population addressed the reciprocal posture of mentoring, eager and willing to serve as peer mentors to other returning students. One who attends a women's college with a program for returning students described

in detail the assignment of a mentor as soon as the new student arrives on campus for a comprehensive 3-day orientation distinct from the orientation targeted to post high school students. As an upper class student with an independent personality, she enjoys the mentor role and sees great value in it, especially for students who arrive with great anxiety: "I was not given a worried or frightened mentee, but if I had one with serious needs, I would have been there for her. That's what the program is about."

A recent graduate from a state university found out about their relatively new peer mentoring program mid-way through her years in school. She thinks it is "an absolute must" so returning students have a mechanism for finding out about special services, such as tutoring, test anxiety, and math labs. Younger students share this type of information informally, "through the grapevine," but the more isolated older student may stumble along uninformed unless a faculty member has specific cause and opportunity to dispense the information. She enjoys the mentor role so much that she'd like to have "a little office [on campus] a few hours a week...to talk to people and make them feel comfortable. I'd love to do something on the campus."

Elder students' desire or willingness to function as mentors to other students, to share their experiences and their wisdom, and to continue learning in a recognized relationship with others, presents a great opportunity to higher education and addresses elders' ongoing need to contribute. Through mentoring on campus, elders can remain active, continue a bond with the

institution most of them come to love during their degree program, and make a difference in the lives of younger students or neophyte elder students. Daloz (1986, 1999) and Zachary (2000) have written primers on mentoring to facilitate adult learning; a turn of the kaleidoscope (Kanter, 1985) will adapt their methods to extending older adult learning beyond the accomplishment of a degree to a major contribution to society.

The Continuum of Life Experience As Key to Planning

The consideration of the older learner as mentor leads naturally into a discussion of the informants' view of the role their life experience plays in the learning process. During the face to face interviews, at least half the informants made reference to their life experience, most commonly when offering advice to faculty who teach older students or when describing the classroom behavior of faculty as effective or ineffective. As a group, they want to be treated the same way that any other student is treated in the classroom, but they also want that which distinguishes them from younger students—their life experience—to be honored.

One makes this suggestion to faculty: "Treat us with respect...Explore the experiences of these women, so that you know where they're coming from and what they expect, so you know how to relate to them." Another maintains that "we mature students are different when we speak in class. We talk about different things...because [we] have experience." This same student is

sensitive to the fact that young faculty might “feel that we know more than they do, and that would make them uneasy—not in their field...but life experience that might come into it.” She goes a step further, suggesting that it is the mature student’s responsibility to “put them at ease and to let them know that we’re supportive and we’re there to learn.”

Another participant from a college with a program for returning students—and therefore, a communication network—states that “word gets around pretty fast if somebody doesn’t like the older students, and if you have any sense, you avoid these people.” She obviously followed her own advice since she cited no personal negative classroom experiences. She also cautioned returning students of all ages not to dominate class discussions with their life experiences, reminding them that instructors “have their own agenda as to how they want to teach and what they’re trying to get out of a class. If you hop in with your life experiences, it doesn’t always work out that way.” She went on to explain that some younger students commit the same transgression, constantly interrupting the instructor. While most of her older peers do not interrupt the teacher, she wryly noted that “they dance with their hands up all the time.”

On a positive note, a 73 year old testifies that in class she is called on “as much as the other kids... In some classes, even more because I could remember the Depression, for example.” In a theater class in which her group was developing a composite of Arthur Miller’s life, she explained to the younger

students how Miller in Brooklyn and she in a small town in Massachusetts both had their milk delivered by horse and wagon. The professor remarked, "I'm so glad you made that connection because you lived it." The respondent followed her personally positive remarks with the admission that other older students have told her of receiving disparaging remarks from faculty, but it hasn't happened to her.

While any given informant reported only a few disappointing classroom incidents, the citing of such incidents was frequent enough from informants attending all types of colleges to suggest that some activity to raise the consciousness of faculty—full-time and part-time—is advisable. The negative attitudes and questionable teaching techniques as described by these informants may affect the entire class, but the older learner is highly sensitive to the treatment and will express dissatisfaction when the opportunity presents itself. A 60 year old speaks of an art class as "painful because there was so much I thought I had experienced, I mean I have a home I own, I have my own art, I've been to Europe, I've been to almost all the museums in the United States, but he presented class in such a way that I felt I did not have anything to add to the class—and I resented that."

Since current learning theory postulates that new learning is always based upon existing knowledge acquired through experience, and since the majority of today's college students arrive on campus with credible work and life experience, these classroom strategies criticized by my informants as ageist

might best be addressed through faculty development activities on contemporary learning theory. More pertinent to the role of experience in planning for life after college was the gerontology major's description of her frustration in seeking employment at the end of her degree program and my response in the form of a description of prior learning assessment.

The fact that you have experience is not an asset. It doesn't help anything at all. The fact that you ran a hotel with your mother—just the two of us ran a hotel— and I did all the cooking, and we'd feed 125 people at a time. You can't believe what kind of organization goes into something like that, but I guess a lot of people can't transfer that into knowledge.

Following her comments, I suggested that prior learning assessment might be helpful in this situation, a process whereby the student lists experiences and then reflects upon those experiences to extract the learning that actually occurred. She then relayed her interest in developing a curriculum or a process to assist those approaching retirement to plan for it by realizing who they *are* today, considering all their knowledge, skills, and competencies. She described the timeline used by gerontologists to highlight the individual's accomplishments, strengths, childhood interests, and goals still to be met.

She also recalled the effectiveness of a resume writing technique used by the *career counselor* at the college where her husband worked at the time she was searching for a job after completing her degree.

She showed me how my skills could be reinterpreted. Did you ever see Monet's painting of his Lily Gardens? He did that painting in four different shades—green, rust, blue, and mauve (I think). It was like four

different paintings, okay? She showed me how I could look in four different colors...I think they should have a course on this kind of thing right in college.

Combining the techniques of assessing prior learning, charting the life course on a timeline, and creatively drafting the elder's resume in a variety of hues might form the basis of an individual or group process for post-graduation planning. This could be an initial step in acquiring the "sense of where you are" and in "utilizing your skills in a new way." Sixty to 88 years of life experience *plus* a recent college education equal a new kind of equation for leadership, citizenship, and service.

Discernment Processes to Facilitate Planning

Continuing to probe for other sources of information about post-graduate planning, I asked the degree holders if they had ever attended a seminar or workshop about life after college. Only one of them had done so, but not at her alma mater. Another college in the area offered a short course for "women who were bored after their kids were gone...who didn't quite know what they wanted to do. They were all younger people and I just did it for fun." Another spoke highly of a 3-day seminar required for all students in her major to prepare for the anticipated job search to follow graduation, but commented that a more general seminar "would have been fantastic."

None of the others had attended or heard of such an experience. The two who graduated in their 80's expressed no interest for themselves, but one

of them noted “such a difference between...65 when you think of retirement and 85. I think it would be wonderful to talk to people who were 65...but not 88.”

Another in her early 70's who seems to be wrestling with the “What next?” issue also drew a line of distinction in age and grounded in the context of employment: “...people who are 60 have more time than my age of 73. I mean even 60 is on the edge. It depends on where you live and what's available to you, but I don't think too many people are willing to uproot themselves at an older age.”

Several others, who are either floundering now or who floundered years ago when they graduated, found great merit in the idea. One suggested that a seminar be offered two months before graduation to generate thinking and planning close to the achievement of the academic goal. Another was receptive to working with someone in a consulting fashion “to give me some very good ideas and then I should go off by myself and put those all together somehow.” She appended a comment on human nature: “When you're not alone, when there's someone to help you accomplish things...you're more apt to get busy and do it.” A third recommended that a seminar might include “some way of discerning what would be your strong points. What you should direct yourself into as far as the master's....You need some direction...and encouragement.”

Within the group of current students, all but 2 found the seminar idea appealing. One of them in her mid-70's—and appearing to have some health issues—holds fast throughout the interview to the notion of studying for its own

sake and hopes to live long enough to finish the degree. She claims no interest in a seminar whatsoever. The other lacking interest expresses doubt that a seminar “could be specific enough to your individual situation....Talking to a mentor [would be better].”

Two of the younger students in this group who attend women’s colleges with special programs for returning students interpreted the seminar question within the context of employment or career planning. One has already attended a workshop sponsored by the Career Development Office for those considering a master’s degree in social work and the other one has it on her to-do list to attend study groups on resume writing at a similar office. Another states that she would attend a seminar if she heard of one. “Right now what’s making me timid or not focus on life after college is, first of all, my nature, and secondly, the fact that no one’s approached me with any kind of direction in that....If someone came up with a good suggestion, I’d be willing to consider it.”

Another would attend a seminar as an antidote to “feeling like a lone plodder.” The student who maintained earlier that there was absolutely no one with whom to discuss her plans—except her cat—would make the effort to attend a seminar “because I like to listen to other people’s perspectives, their thoughts, their ideas, and that is the way I expand my thinking.” These responses suggest the advisability of designing a formal discernment process to engage third age students or recent graduates in discussing and planning for

life after college. The discernment process might be delivered in a multiple session seminar or workshop conducted by faculty and staff conversant with older adult learning issues and concerns.

The Talented in Transition

As the women in this sample spoke of their early years, their aspirations and disappointments, I soon came to realize that most of them would be considered “gifted” or “talented” in today’s educational system. Exhibiting ability in music or art, being offered the opportunity to skip grades in elementary school, graduating at the top of their high school class, experiencing a true yearning to learn that, denied, resulted in pain (Streznewski, 1999)—all suggest above average or extraordinary potential.

These women, like those in Lewis Terman’s classic long-range study of the gifted, from childhood to old age, were “resourceful in composing lives around the limitations imposed upon them by society and themselves” (Kerr, 1994). Several established themselves in lucrative and/or satisfying careers without the benefit of a college degree, in addition to managing homes and families. Once freed of child-rearing responsibilities, and energized by what Margaret Mead called “post menopausal zest” (Sheehy, 1993, p. 221), they claimed an opportunity in the second half of life to “give birth to nothing less than [themselves]” (Northrup, 2001, p. 43). By returning to higher education at a time socially perceived as “off time” (Neugarten, 1968) to fulfill a deferred

dream and to actualize their academic potential, they demonstrated a *resiliency* characteristic of talented women whose achievement has not been nurtured (Noble, 1996). The emergence from the data of the importance of mentors in their lives is not surprising since “resilience does not occur in a vacuum....It is through other people that women sense the magnitude of their gifts and possible directions for fulfilling their talents” (p. 433).

The self-confidence or self-esteem mentioned by so many respondents as an outcome of academic success remains a key ingredient in activating creative potential. Women’s struggles with self-esteem, often begun in adolescence and continued throughout life (Kerr, 1994), play a central role “in aiming high, taking risks, and confronting challenges, [making] this gender-related issue a vital factor in talent development” (Noble, 1996, p. 435). With the older graduate so keenly aware of her enhanced self-esteem at the completion of her degree program, the first year following graduation presents itself as the opportune time for college personnel to facilitate creative productivity.

For most of the respondents, the decision to enter or re-enter college was triggered by a life event that resulted in a transition—spouse’s serious illness, widowhood, divorce, retirement, empty nesting. Their impetus to engage in formal learning appears to be consistent with research that correlates from 50% (Blaxter & Tight, 1995) to 83% (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980) of adult motivation to learn with the need to cope with some change in their lives. Adult

development theories—whether sequential (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Levinson, 1978; Kegan, 1982), cyclical (Hudson, 1991), or life eventual (Hultsch & Plemons, 1979)—ascribe significance to transitions as individuals adapt, grow, and construct meaning from the challenges of life. The correspondence has been noted between transitional phases and common age ranges for attending college among both traditional and nontraditional age students (Creel, 1996), suggesting that higher education professionals work primarily with adults of all ages in transition.

Central to transition theory is the notion of movement, caused by some disorienting factor, from one state or stage to another, after passing through a time of quiet incubation. Bridges (1980) describes the 3-step process as letting go, entering a neutral zone for a period of time, and then making a new beginning. Emphasizing the continuity of the self amidst the transition, he identifies the transition process as “a loop in the life-journey, going out and away from the main flow for a time and then a coming around and back” (p. 149). At the point of return, the growth is integrated into the person’s identity and becomes a part of who that person is.

This kind of growth insinuates itself gradually into the human personality, enabling elderly persons to maintain, after 7 or 8 decades of transitions, that they are who they have always been (Kaufman, 1986). Two informants in my population expressed sensitivity to changes wrought in the “self” during their college experiences. One who revels daily in her school experiences said, “All

of a sudden, this sense of self is so amazingly awesome in terms of who I am and what I've become in the course of this education. You know, it's just been an on-going process again. It's just wonderful." But another, a decade older than the first and having graduated 10 years ago, admitted, "I didn't feel as though I knew who I was now that I was educated."

Such a quandary might be faced by a graduate of any age, highlighting the importance of providing a senior capstone experience for all students. In the universal dictum of the *Academic Advising Handbook*, "Four years of undergraduate study should be capped by successful transition into the work world or graduate school" (Kramer, 2000, p. 100). Since the older adult graduate's transition does not naturally include work or graduate school as viable options, the potential for disequilibrium is exacerbated in a climate bounded by this one frame of reference. In the words of a 73 year old informant, "I think the thing that was most disappointing to me when I finished was to know that there was no way I could go on and have a career. It's still disappointing."

The *Academic Advising Handbook* also states that "the senior year is not only a transitional one but also a period of questioning and reflecting" (p. 100). Thus, the senior year experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998) for all students should include opportunity and encouragement to reflect upon what they have learned, how they have changed, who they have become, and how all of this affects their goals. In reality, senior year activities are most often

truncated to career planning and preparation for the job interview, resulting in a lost opportunity to encourage self-reflexivity in all students and total disregard of the older student's unique transitional needs.

In this section I have attempted to establish that many of my informants exhibit the characteristics of gifted women whose talents were denied nurture in young adulthood. A combination of social convention and family circumstances resulted in a *lack of expectations* for this generation of silent, adaptive (Strauss & Howe, 1991) women, even though many of them demonstrated extraordinary potential in their early or teen years.

When they entered or re-entered college in later adulthood, they seized the moment provided by some life event to fulfill their long held academic dreams. They thus bear similarity to other segments of the college population experiencing transition prompted by age or life event. At the time of the senior year transition, however, their needs are dissimilar from those of younger graduates looking toward a career or graduate school. By ignoring their needs, higher education reprises society's *lack of expectations* for these women, once again disallowing the actualization of their potential.

Summary

In this chapter I have described what I learned from the 20 unique stories of my research partners. Early in the writing phase, I considered developing a composite of all their experiences as a vehicle for conveying the patterns and

themes that were emerging from the data, but soon realized that the diversity inherent in their life experiences needed to be relayed—and revered—not camouflaged in composite. In fact, the multiplicity represented in their circumstances and preferences signifies that services or structures that devolve from this study should include a range of options; one size is not going to fit all from age 60 to 90 or 100.

Continuity does exist, however, in the majority's perception while in college that the next phase of life after college will somehow take care of itself. When this does not happen, the graduate is unsure whom to contact for assistance in discerning what to do next. Preferences for activity after college, either paid or unpaid, include the creative—such as writing, painting, and music; the generative—such as mentoring, tutoring, or working with the elderly; and the rendering of service—as community volunteers, docents in historical homes, library board members. Maintaining an ongoing relationship with the college and continuing to learn, formally or informally, assume great importance.

At some points during the interviews and the focus group discussion, the lines of distinction blur between planning for life after college and planning for life in retirement, a natural overlap given the life stage of the informants, but a significant factor to call to the attention of college personnel. The Career Development Office and the Community Service Office may soon be called upon to work in tandem on behalf of this special population.

The next chapter will contain my proposal for a comprehensive range of services for the older adult, designed to facilitate the transition from student life to a fulfilling and productive post-graduate life.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS: THEORY AND SERVICES

In this chapter I will use the testimony of my respondents described in the preceding chapter and in a focus group discussion as the basis for developing a proposal for a comprehensive range of services to address the post-graduation preparation needs of college students in the third age of life. This proposal may seem to contradict research cited in the literature review indicating that special support services for older adults are not warranted or expected (Perkins & Robertson-Tchabo, 1981; Kingston and Drotter, 1983).

That research, conducted 20 years ago to assess the impact of tuition waiver policies, focused on physical access, logistical issues, and overall satisfaction with campus experiences. Outcomes revealed general satisfaction with college services and recognized that older students should be approached as individuals with differing needs rather than as a special group. This research, situated in a new era of services tailored to numerous subpopulations, asks a specific question about post-graduation preparation, an area of increasing concern for all college populations.

Data gathered in this study suggest that sound preparation for life after college should begin at the admission phase, with interim steps along the way, focused activity during the senior year, and maintenance of an intentional connection between college and graduate for at least one year following graduation. Many features of the proposal are generalizable to younger cohorts of adult students, rendering implementation more practical in environments with scarce resources and more politically feasible on campuses not yet sensitive to older students' needs.

For a significant number of students in the targeted age group, preparation for life after college coincides with preparation for retirement, suggesting a new area for development of college personnel. Informants' expressed interest in creative endeavors and making a difference in the lives of others warrant an exploration of mechanisms to support creativity in older adulthood and integration of older adults into campus-wide service-learning programs.

While several of the informants in this study entered college through special programs targeted to older adults, none of them experienced services or programming designed to help them plan for post-collegiate life. The needs for such preparation that emerged from the data of this study are conceptually related to a growing movement in higher education called "the senior year experience."

Deficiencies in Existing Institutional Support Systems

In keeping with my research focus on post-graduation planning, I asked direct questions in both the face to face interviews and the focus group about planning for post-collegiate life. The natural flow of the conversations led to a more general list of what older learners want and need from the institution, from admission to graduation and beyond, revealing older students' perceived gaps between their particular needs and existing institutional support systems designed for a population distinctly different from themselves. The data revealed deficiencies in existing support systems in the following areas:

- understanding by college personnel of older students' motivations for returning to college during this phase of life,
- understanding by faculty of the roles to be played by cumulative life experience in the development of new knowledge,
- mechanisms at entry, mid-point, and senior year to encourage reflection upon post-graduate life or decision making for the next phase of life,
- a network to facilitate communication among older students,
- a mentoring program,
- office or staff charged with advocating for the interests of older students,
- assistance in the selection of a major consistent with the student's interests, abilities, *and* stage of life,

- assistance in developing a “road map” to the student’s desired destination,
- career guidance that encompasses holistic retirement planning,
- access to guidance services and discernment processes beyond graduation, and
- recognition of older students’ potential as an educational resource to be tapped by the institution both before and after graduation.

The articulation of these needs by my informants made it clear that a comprehensive plan to provide improved services *throughout* the student’s collegiate experience is likely to result in a more satisfying transition to post-collegiate life, including an ongoing and mutually beneficial connection with the alma mater.

Framework for Interpretation

Commentators respected for their astute observation of patterns and trends in higher education often identify today’s—and tomorrow’s—greatest challenge as pressure to compete in the ever widening educational marketplace. They indicate that individuality, innovation, and creativity will be the hallmarks of those who survive and prosper (Kolodny, 1998; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998). Adaptation to changing conditions, a survival strategy formerly assigned to the vulnerable liberal arts college (Breneman, 1983), is now recognized as the single most important factor in sustaining the traditional

value and power of the entire higher education industry (Cohen, 1998). The time-honored image of campus as “youth ghetto” (Boyer, 1974) has given way in the last few years to the contemporary image of the “family-friendly campus” (Kolodny, 1998), an intergenerational agora offering a panoply of educational services to students of all ages, 24 hours a day.

Twelve years ago when some colleges and universities were still reeling under the arrival of a significant number of working adult students, Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) published a landmark work called *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services from Entry to Departure*. During the intervening 12 years, colleges whose survival depended upon this new population learned to adapt to their needs and now compete for their attendance. In the adaptation process, the finer points of Schlossberg et al.’s recommendations have been ignored or superseded by accelerated programming that has come to represent collegiate services tailored to adults on many campuses. A review of this text in juxtaposition with my data analysis revealed that Schlossberg et al.’s comprehensive model of services for adult learners of all ages serves as a suitable framework within which to propose services designed for the older adult.

Education As a Transition Process

The concept of transition forms the foundation of the framework, with transition defined as “an event...or nonevent that alters one’s roles,

relationships, routines, and assumptions (p. 14). Even though adults experience education in vastly different ways, there is no denying that adding the academic regimen to a life full of other commitments results in change to internal and external aspects of that life. The duration of this time of change renders education a full-scale transition *process*, since it begins with the student's first thoughts of entering school and ends only after graduation or completion when the experience has been fully assimilated into her life. Schlossberg et al. break down the process "into three main parts: *moving into* the learning environment, *moving through* it, and preparing to leave, or *moving on*" [emphasis in original] (p.15).

Moving into the Learning Environment

Moving into the learning environment naturally includes the admission and orientation process. While my interview and focus group questions centered on the end of the academic program in terms of post-graduate life, the data clearly supported Schlossberg et al.'s assertion that the manner of entering the institution holds great importance and indicated further that it may, in fact, presage satisfaction at completion.

The design of this study included document analysis of admission forms in order to triangulate data regarding the informants' reasons for attending college and early thoughts on post-graduate life. I looked for statements made

at entrance to college on the application form, statements made on the written questionnaire mailed before the interview, and statements made in the face to face interview. Upon discovery of Schlossberg et al.'s framework, I regarded the nature of information asked on the application for admission as equally important as information provided by the informants.

Only 4 of the 13 institutions represented in the study returned forms containing statements of purpose or lengthier essays. Either such questions are not asked or forms are not retained. Of those who supplied the documents, two colleges with special programs for returning students asked for a substantial statement of purpose and a discussion of possible plans upon completion of the degree, to be typed and attached. One college asked for an "autobiography detailing the events, experiences, and people leading to your decision to attend Weekend College" and provided 6 inches of space for response. Another asked for a "brief statement about what you expect to gain from your collegiate experience," in addition to an accounting of "your time since high school," and provided 4 inches of space for response plus the option to continue on a separate sheet of paper. Clearly, these forms seek information for the admission decision only.

Maintaining that pre-enrollment advice is critical to the student's success, Schlossberg et al. recommend the posing of "application questions [that] can serve useful educational purposes" (p. 72). For the third age student, pertinent questions might include the standard ones about past activities and

involvements, immediate and long-term goals, current responsibilities, and resources needed for learning, in addition to more age-specific questions related to new roles that might evolve from the collegiate experience, thoughts about retirement, volunteer experience, and interest in having a mentor or in serving as a mentor.

Answering such questions may serve to raise the awareness of older students to some of the ramifications of seeking a college education and also serve as a catalyst for meaningful conversation with an admissions counselor or adviser. When college personnel raise questions informed by adult development issues that have not occurred to the potential student, confidence in the institution should escalate. Even if some of the questions are potentially disquieting, they can be posed in a climate where “we serve [our clientele] best by alerting them to realistic obstacles and by supporting their efforts to meet significant challenges” (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1990, p. 437). For this approach to be effective, college personnel interviewing third age students and processing the answers to application form questions should be re-trained in adult development issues, as suggested by the informants.

A few age-specific questions might also serve as preparation for either an orientation or a capstone activity in guided autobiography (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Considered a “form of semistructured life review” (p. 1), guided autobiography is a group process in which anyone from midlife to older age reflects upon past life in terms of themes suggested by the leader, writes

short essays on those reflections, and then shares them with group members. While life review is most commonly associated with the resolution of identity issues toward the end of life, guided autobiography can be used in a variety of settings—including the academic—to evaluate personal resources and decide “how to allocate time and energy in the future” (Perls & Silver, 1999, p. 162).

The focus group conversation revealed that students also need more information at entry than they typically receive. The needed information varies from specifics about majors, to academic expectations and writing papers, to help in discerning what possibilities a college degree might offer. The informant with a feminist viewpoint identified the inadequacy of provided information as “the age-old problem about women...not [being] told everything.” She also attributed the paucity of information to an unstated but implied response to women who begin an enterprise without clarity of goals—“You don’t know what you want, so don’t bother me.” Another who chose a vocationally oriented major in her late 50’s now wishes that she had been more aware of retirement lifestyle when choosing a major. A respondent who graduated 10 years ago admitted that she “never thought beyond the end of [her] nose” when starting her degree program. Her suggestion now:

I keep thinking that before a person actually starts school, there should be some kind of course—maybe not for credit—but as a person comes to the admissions office, who is an older person and wants to go back to school, they say: ‘First, we want you to take this information course to give you some idea of what it’s like.’ You know, if you’re going to make use of it, you need to have more information....I just did what I wanted to

do, but I think that's one mistake....If I had a course like that before I started, not that it would have changed my going to school, but I would have taken more time to plan it a little bit.

Schlossberg et al. recommend both an orientation workshop and a more extensive orientation course to be taken for credit and mandated for first-time students and for those returning to college after a long hiatus. The course, lasting a full semester, acknowledges the transitional nature of the *moving in* process. It provides a faculty or staff member as an accessible "adviser archetype" [my term] until the student builds a comfortable relationship with an assigned academic adviser. It establishes the beginnings of a social network on campus and, most importantly, it offers substantial content. The content should include guided autobiography (described above), adult development theory, learning styles assessment, prior learning assessment, career exploration, alternative roles exploration (including the evolving nature of retirement), goal-setting activities, and academic expectations.

My conceptualization of the course extrapolates that proposed by Schlossberg et al. to accommodate third age learners in an intergenerational setting where their age-specific needs are *included* on a continuum of life course development. Even though the majority of the adult students in the class will be younger than the third age students, aging demographics and extension of life expectancy to 100 in the near future warrants everyone's consideration of life course issues. Most of my informants listed interaction with students of all ages among the most enjoyable features of attending college.

One expressed certainty that her active participation in class and good grades dispelled ageist misperceptions: "I think [the young students] respected me for it because most people think the older you get, the more you lose it." The small group processes and the sharing of personal narratives in the guided autobiography process are likely to build mutual understanding and admiration among generations.

The learning styles assessment will generate self-knowledge, assist in career or alternative role goal-setting, and empower students to be more self-directed in their academic pursuits. Prior learning assessment (PLA) will build self-esteem and respond to my informants' concern that their life experience is perceived as valuable and useful by college personnel. A rigorous process, PLA respects, recognizes, and credits college-level learning that has been acquired outside the classroom, through work, leisure pursuits, volunteering, or self-study. My oldest research participant spoke proudly of having earned 30 credits by submitting a 100-page portfolio that documented her learning from 32 years of managing her community's daycare center.

Career exploration strategies should be introduced in the course as vital for students of all ages. If higher education is to offer leadership in opening up career opportunities for older people, education about careers is an appropriate starting point (Sheppard & Fisher, 1985). It may also be the starting point for wisely choosing a major. Related to career exploration and also mandatory for all orientation students will be an exploration of alternative

roles for adults in later life. In the words of one of my informants, what may emerge as important is “not the job opportunities, it’s utilizing your skills in a new way.”

For education to serve as a “catalyst to assist older learners in finding and developing new methods or opportunities for utilizing their talents” (Ginsberg, 2000, p. 3), educators must introduce all students to the concept of *structural lag*. Riley, Kahn, and Foner (1994) define this social phenomenon as a “mismatch between people and the social structures, institutions, and norms that surround them” (p. 1). It affects people of all ages, but most dramatically retirees who enter the societal structure of retirement as it was defined in the 19th century when few people lived past the official retirement age of 65. Today’s retirees can easily expect to live another 25 to 30 years vigorously in retirement—as noted by several of my respondents—but society has not scripted a satisfying, contributory role for them. “There is a dynamic interplay between people growing older and society undergoing change... People’s lives are influenced by changing social structures; and reciprocally, the changes in people’s lives exert pressures on social structures for still further change” (p. 3-4).

One way educators can exert pressure on society involves alerting all adult learners to the need in older adulthood to consciously seek a vital role since society does not provide one for them. I am haunted by the words and demeanor of the youthful 73 year old recent graduate telling me of the sadness

she feels now, having been made aware of so many career opportunities for women that are denied her by her age. "I'm so tired of people saying to me, 'What are you going to do now?' It's getting a little hard to take....I don't come from a long-lived family, so I haven't had the experience in my family to have people in their 80's going on and doing great things."

The first step is suggesting to learners that "great" things *can* be done in their 80's (and 90's), offering examples and role models of productivity and creativity in aging, and then, helping each one discern her strengths and preferences for use in new role development in the post-graduate, retirement years. While higher education may inspire commendable individual change, the more critical transformation of public policy (Jacobs, 1993) is likely to occur gradually as the age wave rolls into elderhood. In the orientation course, the relatively simple act of raising the awareness of adult learners to the concept of structural lag and exploring alternative roles for retirees is likely to till the soil for better planning and may even sow a few seeds of advocacy.

Goal setting forms one facet of both guided autobiography and prior learning assessment, as the student looks back on life in preparation for looking forward to its next phase. A natural outcome of a consideration of alternative roles, the goal setting exercise may provide a helpful impetus to those who enter college with no vision for life post diploma. The orientation facilitator might also use the goal setting exercise as an appropriate occasion for encouraging students to explore campus activities outside the classroom that

might contribute to post-graduation goals (Schlossberg et al., 1989) or enhance the overall collegiate experience. For example, several of my informants claimed a long-time interest in writing or previous experience in the publishing field. Calling to their attention opportunities to write or perform production tasks for student newspapers and campus literary magazines might inspire them to become involved in such endeavors before they feel overwhelmed by academic responsibilities.

The last component of the orientation course—but by no means the least important—should be an exploration of academic expectations. Students of all ages need multiple opportunities to acquire information about faculty expectations for their performance, the availability of on-campus and on-line resources to support their academic endeavors, technology-based library research, appropriate ways to approach advisers, and strategies for seeking help as soon as they realize they need it. Younger students are more disposed to share this kind of information informally, but older students who do not linger on campus or who perceive themselves as “lone plodders,” in the words of one informant, need structured opportunities for developing academic behaviors.

Midway through the course, the instructor or facilitator might be in a position to prescribe simultaneous or later attendance at skill-building workshops offered by the Academic Development Center in areas such as time management, study skills, test-taking skills, computer skills, mathematical, research and writing skills. The confidence of knowing about these resources

and where to find them, even further into the future, should help dispel the feeling, articulated by one respondent, that “the university is indifferent to my difficulties.”

Schlossberg et al. stress the importance of demonstrating to students that each one of them *matters* to the institution. The orientation course conveys *materring* by acquainting students with services in a way that depicts them as designed from “an ecological perspective that creates a humanizing rather than a dehumanizing environment, where each part of the system works in appropriate coordination with the other parts” (p. 58). If students believe they matter and become aware of a full menu of services to support their learning, they are far more likely to seek help when they need it, even if not sure where it is located. In the effusive words of a recent graduate, “I know every tutor, every lab. If you don’t make use of it, you’re crazy. I was a VIP in the math-tutoring lab. When I went away, I would send them a crazy postcard....There were more older women, older people in the math-tutoring lab than there were young.”

In summary, older adult learners *moving into* the college or university will be well served by admission processes with educational as well as administrative intent. A required, for-credit, semester-long orientation course populated by adult learners of all ages will ignite the fuse of increased personal power and control (McClusky, 1973, as cited in Adair & Mowseian, 1993) that higher education purports to offer third age learners. Even at this early entry

phase, activities and exercises should be designed toward the eventual outcome of enabling them to “see possibilities of contributing their time, skills, and talents in new and meaningful activity” (Ginsberg, 2000, p. 7).

Moving through the Learning Environment

While adult students of any age *move through* the learning environment, they need a range of “programs to foster educational progress” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 111). These programs are most often manifested in specific types of support services targeted to the needs of any special population that convey to its members their value to the institution—that they really do *matter*. Four participants in my research study are currently or were formerly affiliated with 2 colleges that sponsor programs dedicated to supporting the learning of adults of all ages (over 25), with third age students forming an informal subgroup of that total population. Two other participants are or were affiliated with a state university that sponsors a program dedicated specifically to attracting and supporting students over the age of 60.

All of them live outside the state of Ohio, so did not participate in the focus group discussion, but each spoke enthusiastically during the face to face interview of personnel, services, and spaces devoted to assuring their comfort and success on their respective campuses. Their comments about existing services, combined with other informants’ comments or complaints about unmet

needs on their campuses, suggest the advisability of the following mechanisms in support of third age students *moving through* the college experience.

Of primary importance is the identification of an office dedicated to monitoring and serving the interests of older students and at least one staff member to serve as their advocate in competition for scarce institutional resources. Ideally, another more informal space is set aside somewhere on campus as a lounge or comfortable space for socialization or group study. A bulletin board in both areas maintained by staff will promote attendance at special events on and off campus and will also advertise the availability of academic support services. The staff of this office will actively promote the older adult program among all other constituencies on campus so that its clientele will be recognized by other groups on campus and integrated into the mainstream life of the campus.

The program staff will also be responsible for offering professional development opportunities to sensitize faculty and staff to the particular needs of elder learners, including behaviors and verbal patterns that elder learners interpret as ageist. In an in-service environment, faculty can be made aware of the importance of acknowledging and respecting the life experience deemed so important by the learner. Topics for discussion at such an in-service may include:

- ways to capitalize upon adults' life experience while maintaining control of classroom pace;
- the range of faculty response to having highly experienced older learners in their classrooms;
- forming alliances with older students in assessing the learning level of all students in the class, since they are more disposed to ask questions; and
- surveying adult students to capture their experience and talent in a database made available to faculty as a speakers' bureau, a resource to be drawn upon for guest appearances in classes where they may not be enrolled as students.

The in-service might include the invitation for faculty to identify other ways of incorporating older students' experience into the academic life of the campus.

Professional development targeted to career counselors and academic advisers may include these areas:

- listening actively to older learners when they articulate their goals and then, responding with words of support or information to help them attain their goals;
- *gently* urging those who articulate a degree as their only goal to begin pondering life after graduation, but in a way that will not overwhelm them;

- developing strategies for “thinking outside the box” along with the student or for readily referring her to someone else on campus with predisposition and skill in this area;
- providing the option of helping the student identify a small team of faculty and staff to help advise her in reaching her goals and/or listening for a stated or implied desire for a mentor; and
- inviting the above average student to consider entering the Honors Program, competing for academic scholarships, writing for the campus literary magazine, etc.

Through in-service, counselors can be sensitized to the important role they play in supporting the older learner during the *moving through* phase of their education, helping them strive to reach their full potential, not allowing age to circumscribe their aspirations.

The staff dedicated to supporting adult learners on campus should consider establishing a voluntary organization with the potential to address a cluster of student needs. Given that negotiating transitions occurs more smoothly with support from peers (Hagestad, 1996), the organization can serve as an antidote to feelings of isolation and form the basis of a network for sharing information among older students. Peer tutors might be solicited from its members, offering this and other opportunities for *involvement* (Astin, 1984) beyond the confines of the classroom, enhancing the quality of the college experience and increasing the likelihood of long-term loyalty to the institution.

As the organization attains stature on campus, it might petition to send at least one representative to the student governing body. A subcommittee of the organization might assist the staff in developing an ongoing mechanism for assessing older students' needs. Sponsoring and promoting events such as "brown bag" lectures or coffee and conversation will give the group a presence on campus and heightened visibility when flyers advertising these events appear on bulletin boards and announcements appear on campus web pages. Special events also offer the possibility of stimulating intergenerational activity that seems to occur minimally outside the classroom.

Some of my respondents reported a reticence to "interfere" or "intrude" in co-curricular activities where they might interact more informally with younger students, perceiving those activities as the purview of youth. In light of this reticence, the staff should assume a proactive stance in approaching a wide range of campus organizations, encouraging them to issue a special invitation to older students to join their ranks. At the same time, in response to younger students' expressed desire to have some of my informants talk to their mothers about attending college, older students might be invited to offer a presentation about college attendance in adulthood to parents and grandparents during open houses, orientations, and family weekends. The possibilities multiply with the realization that adult students' potential as an institutional resource remains largely untapped.

They tend to be “tapped” only at the point of graduation as a source of publicity for the college or university, represented as a novelty for attending college so late in life. A point of progress might be interviewing them for campus publications during the *moving through* phase, introducing them to the college community, presenting them as role models rather than anomalies, generating visual recognition on campus, and thus mitigating the anonymity that leads so easily to isolation.

The development of support services for older adults *moving through* college is likely to accomplish several worthwhile objectives: establish legitimacy for their presence among faculty, staff, other students, and the broader community; increase their sense of entitlement (Schlossberg et al., 1989) to general and specialized services; and enhance the prospect of recruiting—and retaining—even more students in their age cohort.

Moving on from the Learning Environment

The specific question of this research—post-graduation preparation needs of third age college students—deals most directly with the last phase of college life, addressed recently in the literature of higher education as “the senior year experience.” While the concept of orienting students to college life and expectations has been a time-honored tradition, it has only been in the last decade that serious thought has been devoted to the transition from the role of student to that of employee, graduate student, community volunteer, and

leader. This period of preparation for *moving on* has been aptly described as a time of integration, reflection, closure, and transition (Gardner, Van der Veer & Associates, 1998).

While acknowledging the diversity of today's college students, "the present review of the literature suggests that as a group seniors are a neglected, captive, anxious audience who need to be better cultivated and supported to enhance long-term good will, student satisfaction, and more effective learning" (p. 7). Colleges who make an effort to address seniors' needs usually offer some combination of capstone courses, senior seminars, comprehensive examinations, career guidance, and job placement service. Programming typically reflects the expectation that seniors "stand before transition into a graduate or work career" (Kramer, 2000, p. 100).

Given that culminating programs (Schlossberg et al., 1989) are still evolving for students in all age categories, this may be a most appropriate time to consider the unique post-graduation preparation needs of third age students who may or may not be experiencing the standard transition to graduate study or employment. Data from this research suggest that each student be offered the opportunity to assess her individual situation in dialogue with a known and trusted faculty member, academic adviser, or adult services specialist, or with a combination of such personnel. Ideally, the dialogue will begin early in the last year of the student's presence on campus, but will remain available as an option for at least one full year following graduation. This extended time frame

will accommodate those who do not recognize the need to plan or do not feel able to invest energy in planning until after graduation. This option for later planning will be explained to the student in writing and will include the name of the campus contact person with the assigned responsibility of staying in touch with the student several times in the year following graduation. The contact person will also have the authority to arrange a meeting between the student/alumna and one or several faculty/staff for the purpose of discussing planning for life after college.

During that part of the academic year when workshops or seminars on career planning and job searching strategies are being offered for the college population at large, a more general, multiple session workshop or seminar on transition to life after college should be offered for any interested adult student. Bringing different generations of adults into conversation with each other will enhance the process and will provide a sufficient number of students if there are not enough older adults available at any given time. The agenda for such a seminar might include some or all of the following:

- discussion of transition theory;
- distribution of a list of questions to promote reflection upon decision-making for a satisfying life after college;
- explanation of prior learning assessment, again, with the option to chart learning gleaned from life experience and discuss its integration with learning acquired in college;

- opportunity to engage in life-review, using an instrument comparable to *Self-Discovery Tapestry* (LifeCourse Publishing, 2000), that allows the student to affirm past accomplishments and identify new goals and successful coping strategies;
- exploration of a wellness model, such as Hettler's (1986), that promotes balance in life among the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, vocational, and spiritual dimensions of the personality;
- assistance in developing one or more resumes to represent the student's knowledge, skills, and objectives for an occupation or volunteer activity;
- opportunity to interact with the college's service-learning staff to become familiar with options for community service both through college-sponsored activities and in the broader community;
- invitation to serve the college community as an alumna from a prepared list of options that includes mentoring of entering adult students;
- access from this seminar to anyone on campus with specific information or skill to help the student develop a personal plan for life after graduation.

The student will leave this seminar experience—in the words of one of my informants—"with an information package to help her go where she wants to go." An understanding of the transition that is about to take place will increase

her ability to cope with its challenges. Questions and exercises designed to stimulate reflection upon past accomplishments will lay the foundation for envisioning future accomplishments. Exploring the wellness model as a balanced approach to any phase of life will provide a framework within which to approach the concept of planning holistically for post-graduate life and retirement. Resumes developed for significant volunteering and mentoring, instead of or in addition to job seeking, will offer the possibility of new roles to replace the student role for those not interested in gainful employment. And maintaining a connection with the college through service options on campus will extend a satisfying affiliation while encouraging engagement in productive activity.

A discussion of *moving on* would be incomplete without consideration of the role played by rituals in the transition process. "Ritual inevitably carries a basic message of order, continuity, and predictability" (Myerhoff, 1984, p. 152), serving to ease the tumult that occurs in transition from college to life after college. Kuh (1998) characterizes all of the rituals that take place during the last half of the senior year, including commencement, as a rite of passage, "ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well-defined" (van Gennep, 1908, 1960, p. 3, as cited in Kuh, 1998). The rite of passage occurs in 3 stages identified by van Gennep (1908, 1960, as cited in Kuh, 1998)) as separation, transition, and incorporation.

For the third age learner, activities of separation from the student role may be similar to those of younger students, but transition and incorporation issues will be distinctly different. During the transition between graduation and entering a career or graduate study, the younger student may travel, take a summer job, or search for a job that will launch a career. Incorporation into the next, well-defined role will take place when graduate school begins or the desired job is secured. Transition for the third age student might include “catching up” with family, friends, housework, travel, and pondering what to do next. The delay—or denial—of incorporation represents the root cause of the frustration expressed by some of my informants since society does not offer a “well-defined” role for them upon either graduation or retirement. If retirement—a comparable rite of passage—occurs in tandem with degree completion, the individual experiences double jeopardy.

Third age graduates who choose not to take part in the seminar described above during the senior year may be disposed to do so during the time of disequilibrium following graduation when they realize that they want or need to be engaged in some meaningful activity. Sensitivity to the fact that they may not *feel entitled* to draw upon college personnel and resources after graduation suggests the need for a mechanism to maintain connection the year following graduation. Phone calls, letters, and invitations to special events sent at appropriate intervals during the post-graduation year can be designed to encourage comfort in contacting the college for help when the graduate

perceives its need. Establishing this heightened level of service for third age graduates might serve as a pilot for extending it eventually to any graduate who may be experiencing delay in incorporation to a new role.

Possibilities of "The Roleless Role"

Many of the informants in this study report a personal encounter with the roleless role ascribed to an old age determined in our culture chronologically rather than functionally (Meyerhoff, 1984). "While this cultural vagueness often creates anomie and isolation, at the same time it offers calculating, resourceful elders in many settings occasions in which they may innovate and exploit the rolelessness, a set of fruitful opportunities" (p. 308). It is my contention that affiliation with higher education offers resourceful older adults, particularly women, such a set of "fruitful opportunities."

In Jacobs' (1993) schema for bringing about role change, an individual's efforts, without societal opportunity, results in frustration, anger, and no measurable impact on role change. "Productive role change" (p. 202) is realized only when the individual's efforts are combined with societal opportunity. For women who attend college in the third age of life, higher education should represent a critical component of societal opportunity. That it does not automatically do so requires higher education to take affirmative steps, and thus, assume leadership in expanding social roles for older women.

Current roles for elders include “mentor, consultant, confidant, volunteer, historian, disseminator of the family legacy, grandparent, great-grandparent, and second- or third-career member in the work force” (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p. 20). Informants in this study expressed interest in fulfilling or continuing to fulfill some of these roles, but also sought other roles centered in research, creativity (art, writing, interior design), intergenerational involvement, and service to others. Uniquely situated to nurture and facilitate the development of these types of roles among elders, higher education can most effectively ride the age wave—and begin to serve it—by engaging in “innovative thinking, bold strategizing, and [developing] model programs” (Jacobs, 1993, p. 215).

Internships and Research Assistants

Nearly 20 years ago the University of Massachusetts in Boston established an innovative “model program for professional career training in gerontology targeted at the older person” (Bass, 1988, p. 227). As the program grew, grant funding permitted the addition of a year of non-credit internship in which the graduates of the gerontology program worked in groups on an issue related to the field. Some were trained as researchers to assist state employees in gathering data related to including hospice care under the state’s insurance regulations. The assistant researcher role responded to older adults’

interest in working part time, in working alongside a more highly trained professional, and in making a contribution in an area of importance to their peers.

Two important possibilities emerge from this model program. The first is the prospect of offering the older graduate the option of enrolling in a non-credit internship in the field of her major during the transition year following graduation. This experience would provide an extended connection with the college, would encompass unpaid but meaningful work in the student's area of study, and might include participation in a seminar with students of other ages engaged in credit-bearing internships. The second possibility is that of training interested older adult graduates as researchers during the transitional post-graduate year and placing them as paid or unpaid research assistants with faculty or community agencies. The UMass/Boston outcomes suggest that they might be particularly effective in interviewing other older adults about issues related to their health and well-being.

Career/Retirement Counseling

Another role suited to the older graduate might be that of career counselor for senior adults, both on campus and in community agencies dedicated to senior employment services. Local examples include AARP's Senior Employment Services, Center for New Directions (specifically for women), Forty Plus of Central Ohio, and Job Seekers Support Group.

Collaboration between the agencies and the college might result in training for those who benefited from the senior year transition-to-life-after-college seminar described earlier. Some of the same processes and instruments—e.g., prior learning assessment and Self-Discovery Tapestry—can be used in career counseling. Again, this role would address the older adult's interest in significant volunteer opportunities, on a part-time basis, in an area helpful to peers.

Those who advocated in the recent past for higher education to become as involved in career education for older learners as for younger learners (Sheppard & Fisher, 1985) might now revise their advocacy to include retirement education. As the meaning of retirement blurs and evolves for baby boomers, colleges would do well to offer continuing education opportunities for *holistic* retirement planning that supersedes the standard financial planning workshop. With consulting companies now assisting wealthy retirees in developing “‘portfolios of opportunity’ for the years after full-time work” (Savishinsky, 2000, p. 151), colleges would serve a graying society well by addressing similar needs of the less affluent. Staff who deliver the senior year transition seminar for older students would be equipped to adapt the seminar to the needs of retirees, involving older graduates as assistants and role models for learning throughout the life course.

Creative Endeavors

Treatises on creativity usually begin with a lengthy discussion of its multifarious meanings (Adams-Price, 1998). Within the parameters of this research, “creativity” describes “the process of bringing something new into being”—an original idea, perspective, process, or product that has an impact” (May, 1975, as cited in Cohen, 2000, p. 12). In a culture long fixated on youth, creativity has not commonly been associated with elderhood. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1984) observes:

It is with affection and nostalgia that adults regard the innate creativity of unsocialized children. But usually they are blind to the creativity of *desocialized* elders at the other end of the life cycle, people whose reemerging originality—stemming from social detachment, long experience, the urgency of a shortened future—may be as delightful, surprising, and fruitful as anything to be found among the very young. Among them are personal and social resources that have yet to be mined and appreciated.

A significant number of my informants expressed interest in investing their “personal and social resources” in activities rooted in creativity. Attraction to creative endeavors did not necessarily correlate with choice of major. The art major and the interior design major, 2 of the youngest members of the sample, will *de facto* be engaged in work commonly regarded as creative. Others in majors as diverse as English, psychology, organizational communications, and social work mentioned writing for publication—either fiction or non-fiction emanating from the field of study—as post-graduation objectives.

One of the 2 oldest respondents, with a degree in music, taught first grade in her hometown for “16 and a half years” without benefit of teacher certification. Since retiring from teaching, she has developed a theory for simplifying the teaching of fundamental concepts in kindergarten or first grade. Now that she has a completed degree, her objectives include tutoring elementary school children *and* writing a book that will explicate her theory for teaching the fundamentals. Her proposed title for the book—*Simply Marvelous: How Now I Lay Me an Egg*—resonates with playfulness and delight.

The older graduate may demonstrate *public* creativity, gaining notoriety for her contribution in her own community or beyond, or *personal* creativity, developing an idea or product that enhances life in her own private sphere (Cohen, 2000). Wherever that creativity is manifested, it should be encouraged and supported during the college years and recognized at least within the campus community when brought to fruition. In the example cited above, an academic adviser, mentor, or older adult advocate might suggest to the graduate/former teacher that she present her ideas in a paper for critique by a faculty member in elementary education. If her ideas prove worthy, she can be invited to share them with methods students or student teachers. Local dissemination of the formal expression of her ideas garnered from a lifetime of experience is likely to provide the satisfaction she seeks from the creative effort. My informants emphasized during the focus group discussion that they possess

the initiative to accomplish their goals. What they need from the institution is assistance in devising “a road map” to resources and suggestions for action steps to take them where they know they want to go.

In an effort to consciously support the creative efforts of elders, the caring college might offer a daytime symposium or multiple week workshop on creativity in the second half of life, followed by a series of continuing education courses or informal experiences in art, music, and writing. The University of Quebec in Montreal demonstrates the critical importance of creativity in the education of older adults by offering a formal course entitled “Techniques in Creativity” as part of the core offerings for a unique certificate program in personalized education for older adults (Lemieux, 1997). For elders who have waited two thirds of their lives to approach the banquet of higher education, our role is to serve the entrée and then help them concoct their own dessert.

Intergenerational Involvement

The majority of my research participants expressed enjoyment in attending classes with younger students or with students of all ages. A significant segment of the population also revealed a predisposition to engage in post-graduation activity that involves working with children or in representing children’s interests in the development of public or social policy. This is not surprising, given the elder’s developmental life stage when reconciliation between generativity and stagnation often leads to the expression of

“grand-generativity’ in current relationships with people of all ages...the [integration] of outward-looking care for others with inward-looking concern for self” (Erickson, Erickson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 74). Erikson described elder generativity as “grand” in the sense of grandparenthood, but also because in later life it is “tied to the grand scheme of things” (Kotre, 1999, p. 177).

In a relatively recent study of generative concern among young, midlife, and older adults as expressed in written statements of personal strivings, elderly women demonstrated the highest levels of generative commitment (McAdams, 1996). The results of that research also indicate that “people with strong concerns for the next generation tend to act in ways commensurate with those concerns” (p. 45). If 21st century aging demographics compel social recognition of older adults’ desire to engage in generative endeavors as a vast reserve of untapped productivity (Moen, 1995), perhaps the time will have come to redefine national productivity in terms other than monetary gain. When productivity is redefined to include the acknowledgement that a person’s “work,’ in the sense of his or her exertion of creative activity, constitutes an act of self-actualization and self-fulfillment essential to human contentment” (Rohrlich, 1988, p. 214), the likelihood of developing purposeful roles for older adults will increase exponentially.

Meanwhile, higher education professionals who may be assisting the older graduate to identify purposeful post-graduate activity should be aware of increasing opportunities that link intergenerational learning with civic renewal.

The movement to form across-age partnerships in schools “regards both children and the elderly as resources, not as problems or students or needful clients” (Winston, Kaplan, Perlstein, & Tietze, 2001, p. 5). The development of such programs is one response to concern for a decrease in civic engagement and community life (Putnam, 2000) and is appropriate programming to emerge from the collaboration of collegiate and K-12 service-learning departments. Ranging from mentoring programs, to “co-learning initiatives,” to community service projects, intergenerational educational programs underscore the inability of any one societal institution—family, church, or school—to meet the complex needs of today’s children (Winston et al., 2001). They also honor the “gift of time” (Heilbrun, 1998) that elders are uniquely situated to bestow upon the young.

An even simpler approach to connecting generations has been undertaken by the alma mater of one of my informants with a completed degree. The college sponsors a non-credit continuing education course designed to prepare adults of any age for tutoring elementary school children. She was looking forward to taking the course prior to becoming either a paid or volunteer tutor, having become aware of the need for tutoring among her own grandchildren. However it may be done, older students in search of meaningful engagement with youth as post-graduation activity should be informed of opportunities—if not actually connected to them—via campus resources.

Service to Others

The majority of my informants expressed interest in engaging in post-graduation activities that would “make a difference” in the lives of individuals, young or old, or in the quality of life of the broader community. For higher education to justify the investment of resources in special services for third age students described throughout this chapter, their aspirations must be considered in juxtaposition with society’s needs and higher education’s responsibility to address those needs. This may well be “the teachable moment” to advocate targeted educational services for third agers, while higher education is exploring its role in developing civic responsibility among *all* its students (Ehrlich, 2000).

On many campuses this heightened awareness of the college as “good citizen” is being combined with new learning pedagogies, resulting in the establishment of service-learning programs (Weigert, 1998). Older students’ sense of grand-generativity, current or former involvement in community service, and interest in remaining productive while continuing to learn renders them ideal supporters of service-learning and ideal recipients of *care* (Noddings, 1984) from service-learning staff during the transition year following graduation. In fact, institutional “outreach” to older adult learners might appropriately be initiated at some colleges within a multi-faceted service-learning program. Any such initiative would have to be conducted bearing in mind the difference between “fostering a disposition... and imposing a social

obligation. Building the opportunity for community service into lifelong learning programs for seniors simply opens a pathway, it does not force passage” (Manheimer, 1995, p. 30).

Human Potential

When all is said and done, this research is about supporting women who strive to reach at least some aspects of their *human potential* by attending or completing college in the third age of life. Even though only one of my informants spoke in actual terms of her desire to “develop to full potential,” others alluded to or—by their actions—embodied the concept. And one related this dramatic story that took place on her exploratory visit to the campus where she later chose to pursue her degree (edited for brevity and readability):

Half a dozen students came to talk to the group of prospective students. One of the women was from San Francisco, a 44 year old Japanese/American, a spunky lady who spoke with us about physical education opportunities and who calls the count on the crew when they row for the college’s team. The team has been national champions for two years. A prospective student from England said that she’s always wanted to be a long distance runner, but she just thought she was too old. The Japanese/American woman said to her, ‘You’re not too old. Maybe you can’t do what a 40 year old or a 20 year old would do, but I bet you can do more than you ever dreamed.’ That woman will graduate with me and she’s now a long distance runner in the intramural program. She doesn’t run with the team, but she can run 10 miles.

The new occasion of an increased and more vigorous longevity is offering higher education professionals the opportunity—and the challenge—to redefine expectations for the actualization of potential among college students. While younger adults usually manifest it in terms of linear and tangible

activity—graduate study or employment—this study suggests that older adults may need more complex and individualized assistance to translate the actualization of their potential into satisfying and meaningful activity.

Cohen's (2000) 4 *human potential phases* that occur in the second half of life offer a useful framework within which to consider post-graduation planning for older adults.

- The Midlife Reevaluation Phase (between the 40's and 60's) combines reflection with the desire to create meaning in life.
- The Liberation Phase (60's to early 70's) draws upon the freedom of retirement to allow for experimentation with new roles and endeavors.
- The Summing-Up Phase (70's and older) gives expression to the wisdom gleaned from the life story in autobiography, philanthropy, community activism, and volunteerism.
- The Encore Phase (80's and older) encompasses the desire to make lasting contributions and to take care of unfinished business.

Key elements in each of these phases—*meaning in life, new roles, wisdom expressed in volunteerism, and lasting contributions*—emerged from the data in this study as critically important in the post-graduation life of the informants. The actualization of late-life potential penetrates “the farther reaches of human nature” (Maslow, 1993) and assumes the import of culture-keeping.

Summary

In this chapter I have sought to interpret the data described in Chapter 4 toward the development of a proposal for services designed to facilitate the transition of third age college graduates to life after college. I adapted the *moving in, moving through, and moving on* framework described by Schlossberg et al. (1989) to the particular needs of older adult graduates and indicated that some aspects of the proposal will add value to services for adult populations of all ages.

Central to addressing the needs of older adult learners is recognition of the structural lag that exists between the vitality of older graduates and the dearth of roles provided for them in a culture that has long been fixated on youth. The demographics of aging offer higher education the opportunity to accept a leadership role in recognizing elders as valuable resources in both campus and civic life and in developing new and expanded roles for them as researchers, mentors, agents of civic renewal, and sources of creative energy.

This study suggests that many older adult graduates do not anticipate the disequilibrium they experience at the point of incorporation into life after college. Services tailored to facilitate their unique transition needs must include mechanisms for raising their consciousness to this possibility during the last year of matriculation and for maintaining an intentional connection with them for at least one year following graduation, during the incorporation phase. Design and delivery of these services will include some professional

development for faculty and staff and collaboration between the departments of student affairs, career services, and service-learning or community outreach.

The design of such services will herald a genuine invitation to third age students to enter higher education, demonstrating that they as individuals do indeed *matter* to academia and that their productivity does indeed *matter* to society at large.

CHAPTER 6

LEARNINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

During the last half of the 20th century, higher education has successfully adapted to the needs of several new populations. By the middle of the 21st century, the demographics of aging, the large percentage of older adults with high school diplomas, and the evolving nature of retirement assure college population growth among those in the third age of life. Since college attendance in recent decades has become so closely aligned with workforce preparation, this study was based upon the premise that higher education may need to develop new services and procedures to assist older adults in the transition to post-collegiate life predicated upon something other than paid employment. The study specifically asked what higher education professionals need to know in order to help third age students prepare for life after college.

I situated the research study within the interpretivist paradigm, recognizing that the “reality” of collegiate life and the expectations for post-collegiate life experienced by the participants are functions of their perceptions, socially and symbolically constructed within a given time. I used qualitative methods in conducting the study in order to focus on the limited number of

individuals whom I interviewed, to probe their thought processes and feelings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) about college life and whatever might come next. I analyzed the data using an inductive approach, looking for patterns and themes in the words of the participants in which to ground my proposal for post-graduation preparation of third age students.

The study will conclude with a commentary on the findings, implications of the findings for higher education, and suggestions for further research.

Commentary on the Findings

Despite the geographic distribution of the respondents and the diversity of higher education institutions they have attended, the data generated by this study are inherently limited by the small size of the sample and by the racial and socioeconomic homogeneity of the population. Even though the women in this sample exhibit many of the characteristics of the age cohort born 1925-1942 and described as “silent” and “adaptive” (Strauss & Howe, 1991), subsequent cohorts should benefit from similar services that will be revised in accordance with their characteristics, just as services for younger adult populations are adjusted in terms of their cohort characteristics.

The homogeneity of this population raises the question of expanding access to higher education to a more diverse elder population, which was the intended outcome of the largely ineffective tuition waiver policy that emerged from the 1971 White House Conference on Aging (described in Chapter 1).

Development of a full range of services for older adult students, combined with the marketing of those services *and* reduced tuition policies are likely to increase enrollment in the target population. Virtually all of the respondents in this study agreed to participate in order to communicate to other women in their age range that college remains a viable option—and a worthwhile expenditure of energy—in later adulthood.

The issue of expanded access is embedded within the more complex issue of society's perception of late-life potential and the appropriateness of developing that potential in higher education environments. If higher education seeks to expand its services to older adults, it will have to become actively engaged in the *social marketing* (Kotler & Roberto, 1989) campaign currently being waged on behalf of millions of baby boomers, revolutionizing the meaning of retirement and expectations for a longer, more robust older adulthood.

As the age wave progresses and as all societal structures experience the fullness of its impact, higher education may need to examine whether to segment services to elder adults according to more specific age designations. It was noted in Chapter 3 that 90% of this sample fell into the category of "young-old." The proposal for services to third age students as described in Chapter 5, with its provision for the establishment of a team of campus professionals to assist the individual student in post-graduation preparation, is sufficiently adaptable to all adults over 60.

The fact that the respondents in this study made no mention or only passing mention of health issues, in combination with predictions for increased longevity for future generations, suggests that it may be advantageous for higher education planners to draw upon frameworks that describe older adult development in terms that are other than age-based (Fisher, 1993). It is also consistent with the activity theory of aging (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1968, cited in Atchley, 1994) that older adults pursuing degrees will exhibit traits associated with middle age for as long a time as they are able to maintain autonomy and adapt to involuntary lifestyle changes (e.g., death of a spouse, move from family home to apartment or senior residence facility).

McClusky's theory of margin (Adair & Mowesian, 1993), widely discussed in the fields of adult education and educational gerontology, postulates that learning contributes to one's "ability to maintain a sense of personal well-being and autonomy...to increase personal power" (p. 328). Future research might be undertaken with a larger population to explore the relationship between formal study in older adulthood and maintenance of good health.

Having already described most of the women in this sample as academically talented in their youth, their determination to pursue a college degree later in life than most is consistent with the continuity theory (Atchley, 1994) of aging. The aspect of their personality that placed great value on

learning and formal education remained stable throughout their lives. In fact, many relied upon that value as a sustaining force, entering college during a time of transition or difficulty.

Ongoing personal development has long been recognized as the “unifying purpose of higher education” (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. xv). The return of the interviewees to college in later life can be understood in terms of Hudson’s (1991) cyclical view of adult development, designed for a world commonly perceived as chaotic and as in a constant state of flux. Their behavior and goals are not anomalous within this view that regards development as a continuous revisitation of the same issues—“identity, achievement, intimacy, play [and creativity], search for meaning, and social compassion” (p. 46). Their return to college during the third age—an era of personal fulfillment—can readily be interpreted as an intentional act of self-renewal, of turning inward, exploring and developing new aspects of the “self” and new understandings of the “other.” Their affinity for studying the liberal arts as a means of expanding their world view and their desire to share their lifetime of experience with others in the classroom setting address the transcendent possibilities of late life learning.

While young college students seek to establish an adult identity as distinct from family and even peer expectations, the testimony of the informants in this study suggest that while in college they explored or are exploring facets of their identity that have lain fallow during the years of motherhood,

housewifery, or employment in occupations that produced income but not the highest level of personal satisfaction. The question of “Who am I?”, contextualized by 60+ years of life experience, becomes “Who am I now that I have a college education?” and “Who do I want to become in the 20-30 years of life that remain?” These are the questions of *being* that some may prefer to explore during the year following graduation rather than perfunctorily during the senior year focused on *doing*.

In Hudson’s framework, the natural outcome of personal self-renewal is a sense of self-satisfaction coupled with readiness for a new adventure. Society clearly expects young students to launch into new adventures soon after graduation. The outcomes of this limited study suggest that older adult graduates are also ready for new adventures, but society’s lack of expectations for them can result in an extended period of disequilibrium following graduation. The discernment process is intended to help the graduate identify a range of possible “adventures” and draft a plan for setting out on one or more of them.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Hudson’s cyclical view of development and his model for reeducation throughout adulthood calls for a “new profession of adult mentors...to coach people and organizations through normal transitions and into new life structures” (p. 228). The abilities and characteristics he proposes for such mentors are similar to those described in Chapter 5 as necessary for college personnel leading older adults through the senior discernment process or holistic planning for retirement. In the process of

developing responsive services for older adult graduates, the innovative campus may consider establishing a certificate or degree program for those who would like to function as adult mentors in colleges, agencies, and organizations.

On campuses moving toward new models of career planning that encourage students of all ages to consider post-collegiate activity in terms of life course goals, adapting services to the circumstances of elder students will not appear extraordinary. In fact, the presence of elder students may help career professionals illustrate for younger students the importance of planning for continuous learning during a lifetime of ongoing development.

In summary, this study brings into focus three different “languages” of aging—the one spoken by society that highlights physical decline and a “roleless role” for most elders; the one spoken by adult development theorists that depicts aging as occurring in stages, phases, or spirals; and the one spoken by higher education in terms of the potential for self-fulfillment in the third quarter of life. The Tower of Babel is collapsing under the weight of demographics forcing society to establish roles for a population living longer and healthier while seeking ways to contribute to the common good; under theories of adult development that identify growth as a constant cycle of continuity and change in a chaotic world; under the realization that older adult

students' needs for integration, reflection, closure, and transition are conceptually similar to those of younger students while remaining programmatically distinct.

The informants presented themselves as women who had found ways to adapt their lives to society's expectations and personal circumstances in the 1950's and who are now, in the *third age of life*, looking for ways to use their talents creatively in a context of service to others. Their testimony supports the call to recognize contributions to society in later life as *social productivity* (Sadler, 2000) rather than economic productivity, while simultaneously acknowledging society's need for mentors, mature leaders, models of citizenship and generativity.

The major contribution of this study is the suggestion that the post-graduation preparation needs of third age students can best be addressed by college personnel trained to work creatively and holistically with the student during the senior year and for an extended period of one year beyond graduation. The linchpin of this approach is a discernment process that encourages life review and assessment of prior learning in combination with new learning represented by the college degree. Directly related to current research on "the senior year experience," the recommendation from this study is further exploration of a "senior year plus one" experience.

Implications for Higher Education

The demographics of aging are inspiring re-evaluation of many societal constructs, particularly those affiliated with consumer affairs. A not-for-profit Portland, Oregon, group called Elders in Action has developed the Elder Friendly Certification Program to help businesses appeal to the elder population that controls 77% of the nation's assets (Elder Friendly, 2001). While this study with such a small number in the sample cannot be expected to effect broad change in higher education, subsequent studies with larger and more diverse populations—combined with advocacy resulting from all related studies—have the potential to serve a similar function within higher education. With more adults than ever, particularly women, reaching the age of 60 in possession of a high school diploma, good health, sufficient wealth to attend college, and a deferred desire to do so, adjusting existing services to accommodate their needs is tantamount to preparing for the next—and perhaps the last—frontier of college student enrollment. If this frontier is to attract sufficient “settlers,” the findings of this limited study suggest the following:

College personnel will need to receive professional development opportunities in lifespan adult development, the role of experience in learning, and avoidance of ageist language.

For both faculty and staff—anyone who will be interacting with third age students—instruction in the latest theories of lifespan adult development should

be made available. Such knowledge will enable better understanding of the various motivations of older learners and promote more serious regard for their post-graduate aspirations. Explorations of the role of experience in learning will have applications in work with students of all ages, but particularly with older students who yearn to share pertinent experience in the classroom, have it honored by faculty and fellow students, and utilize it in the acquisition of new knowledge. Faculty might receive assistance in methods of incorporating students' experiences into classroom activities without surrendering control over instructional pacing and content. Sensitivity of all personnel should be raised to the avoidance of ageist language, particularly in attempts to be humorous.

The parallels between planning for post-collegiate life and planning for retirement suggest that elder friendly colleges become more involved in offering continuing education opportunities for holistic retirement planning.

College staff responsible for developing discernment processes to assist older students prepare for life after college would be well-equipped to assist those approaching retirement prepare for their next phase of life. When both for-profit and not-for-profit agencies advertise "retirement planning" workshops, they focus narrowly and insufficiently on financial planning. As definitions of retirement continue to evolve, educational institutions would do well to offer workshops on *comprehensive* retirement planning that include intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual issues, as well as financial.

Once third agers become familiar with the campus from retirement planning workshops, it will be easy to engage them in a range of learning opportunities from one-day experiences to full college courses.

The elder friendly campus recognizes the importance of learning options. Some elders will choose to drop in for an occasional lecture or special event; others will be interested in a series of daytime courses designed specifically for their interests; still others will be interested in collaborating with faculty or staff in the *delivery* of courses for their cohorts. The offering of such options signifies a genuine invitation to older adults to participate in the intellectual and social life of the campus, just as working adults have been fully incorporated into life on many campuses through programming tailored to their needs.

A course entitled “Women in Transition” could be of great benefit for women of all ages for the foreseeable future.

Several participants in this study spoke highly of courses they had taken that dealt with women’s lives in transition, with issues of wellness, and issues of loss. Since we know that transition sparks college attendance, the development of such courses for the entire college population—including the retirement planning population—seems advisable. An additional benefit would be the intergenerational dialogue between women of all ages in such a course.

Both older adult students and the higher education community would benefit from the establishment of an online network focused on the needs of this new population.

Until services for older adult students become *de rigueur*, both students and colleges alike would benefit from the establishment of an online network to serve as a clearinghouse for information on older adult learning and collegiate life and as a means of connecting older adult students with one another. Some of the participants in this study expressed great interest in connecting with others like themselves as an antidote to the feeling of being a “lone plodder.” Colleges lacking sufficient resources to dedicate staff to the needs of the third age population could subscribe to the network for advice and support while building a student base sufficiently large to sustain a local office.

Colleges should facilitate more intergenerational learning opportunities, both formal and informal.

Most of the participants in this study articulated their enjoyment of learning and interacting with students of all ages. However, some of their testimony reflected that presence in the same classroom with students of other generations did not automatically engender positive interaction, similar to a review of research on intergenerational projects reported by Fox and Giles (1993, as cited in Manheimer et al., 1995). College personnel may need

training in the facilitation of authentic dialogue between students of various generations within the classroom and assistance in developing informal learning activities between generations in other campus venues.

Partnerships should be explored between colleges and community agencies offering services to elders.

In this age of “town and gown” collaboration on many issues affecting the entire community, colleges should use their outreach and service-learning programs to explore the possibility of partnership with agencies and residences that serve older adults. For example, agencies that specialize in assisting older adults to find employment may collaborate with the college’s Career Services department in finding jobs for older graduates; senior residences may be able to provide a busload of students for a one-day learning event or cultural arts activity sponsored by the college; a combination of agencies and residences may serve as community partners for courses with service-learning components.

Older adult students should be recognized as a welcome minority on campus and, as with other welcome minorities, an office or a staff member should be assigned to monitor services provided to them.

Participants in this study who attended colleges or universities with a program and office dedicated to providing service to older adults, or returning

adults of any age, spoke positively about attention paid to their needs, even though none of them had received particular assistance in planning for life after college. Assessment procedures or continuous quality improvement procedures within such a program or office should include pre- and post-graduation surveys and focus groups of the target population to ensure that their needs are being met.

Further Research

Since older adult populations on college campuses represent a relatively recent phenomenon, additional study of this sample population is recommended. Pursuant to this particular group of participants, a follow-up study of both groups of women is warranted. For the 9 women still attending college at the time they were interviewed, such a study should attempt to assess the catalytic validity of this research, to determine what impact the intervention of this study might have had upon the remainder of their collegiate experience and their preparation for post-collegiate life. For the 11 women who had graduated at the time they were interviewed, a follow-up study should attempt to track their post-graduation activities for the assessment of any changes brought about by participation in this study.

For those who had graduated just a few months prior to the interview, further study would also ascertain the steps taken and the amount of time required to accomplish the post-collegiate transition. The post-collegiate

transition itself merits research—the issues involved, how individuals resolve them, how long it takes for them to be resolved, what happens if the issues are not resolved.

Several participants in this study noted the attendance of older men in some of their classes and suggested that a similar study of men in the same age range would be interesting as a means of comparing the impact of post-graduation planning upon men with that of women. Subsequent studies of either men or women should seek a wider range of participation among racial and socioeconomic groups. While this study did not target financially stable white women, sampling techniques used to attract participants resulted in a racially homogeneous group with only one participant perceived as economically vulnerable.

Since the purpose of this study was to probe the lived experience of third age women college students regarding their planning for life after college, only the women students themselves were interviewed. Another approach to the question might include the students as well as their admission counselors, academic advisers and other college personnel whom they would identify as significant to their planning for life after college.

With the demographics of aging spawning a heightened interest in an age-integrated society, a related study might monitor the effects of intergenerational learning in college classrooms containing young students, working adult students, and older adult students. Researchers might explore

dynamics in those classrooms both with and without intervention in the form of discussion of age stereotypes, similar vs. dissimilar values, and specific planning by the instructor in light of age-distinct needs.

Since several participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the attitudes and behaviors of young faculty toward older students, another study might explore the relationship between older students and faculty of various ages. Or, the changes in culturally determined age-based relationships when the age standard of older teacher and younger student are reversed. [A participant in this study related a humorous anecdote of entering a campus building with her instructor, stepping back (as the elder) and allowing the younger instructor to hold the door open for her; she realized a moment later that in the context of student and teacher roles, she should have held the door open for her instructor.]

A truly age-integrated society would obviate the need for and interest in most of these research questions. Perhaps conducting the research that asks the questions will help propel us toward this desirable destination. Meanwhile, these third age pioneer women want to share their stories to show others of their age that the journey is well worth the risk.

APPENDIX

Protocol

The seven documents in this appendix include the following:

- 1. The written questionnaire for participants now seeking a degree**
- 2. The written questionnaire for participants with a completed degree**
- 3. Preparation for the interview for participants now seeking a degree**
- 4. Preparation for the interview for participants with a completed degree**
- 5. Interview questions for participants now seeking a degree**
- 6. Interview questions for participants with a completed degree**
- 7. Focus group procedures and questions**

Written Questionnaire for Participants Now Seeking a Degree

Directions: Please answer each question in this section by filling in a blank or placing a check before one or more responses offered in answer to the question.

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you now? _____

3. In what year did you enter college for the first time? _____

4. In what year did you enter (or re-enter) college to pursue your current academic program? _____

5. In what college are you enrolled?

6. Where is it located? _____

7. What is your major?

8. If you have a minor, what is it?

9. Are you seeking financial aid to pay college costs? ____yes ____no

10. Are you currently employed ____yes ____no

11. Are you currently retired? ____yes ____no

12. Does your college have a special program or office to attract and offer services to students over 60? _____yes _____no _____not sure

13. Why are you pursuing a degree in the third age of your life (over 60)?

Check all that apply:

A. _____ I need a credential for a job or vocation I wanted to pursue.

B. _____ I need the undergraduate degree in order to pursue graduate study.

C. _____ I want to finish an endeavor begun earlier in my life.

D. _____ I have an interest in a particular field of study that I want to pursue.

E. _____ I want to keep my mind actively engaged.

F. _____ I want to use time in a productive way.

G. _____ I want to fulfill a lifelong dream.

H. _____ Other(s) _____

14. When you entered college, what did you expect to do or plan to do, after finishing your degree? Check all that apply:

A. _____ Go on to graduate study.

B. _____ Get a job, either part-time or full-time

C. _____ Participate in volunteer work in my community.

D. _____ I didn't think about it.

E. _____ Other _____

15. Is that still your plan? _____yes _____no

16. If you answered "no" to the previous question, explain what you has prompted you to change your plan.

17. Is your family supportive of your decision to pursue a degree?

_____yes _____no

18. Are your friends supportive of your decision to pursue a degree?

_____yes _____no

19. Who is providing you with "emotional" support during your years of study?

Check all that apply:

A. _____ Spouse

B. _____ Children

C. _____ Friends

D. _____ Neighbors

E. _____ Co-workers

F. _____ Other students

G. _____ Pastor or local clergy

H. _____ Academic advisor

I. _____ Other(s) _____

20. Do you have a "social group" among your classmates?

_____yes _____no

21. While taking classes, have you met other students in your age group (over 60)? _____yes _____no

22. Do you participate in or have you participated in any campus clubs or activities? _____yes _____no

23. In general, how do your younger classmates react to you? Check all that apply:

A. _____ They ask me questions about why I am in college at this time of life.

B. _____ They ignore me.

C. _____ They include me in informal conversations.

D. _____ They ask my advice about their own issues or concerns.

E. _____ Other _____

24. In general, how do your instructors react to you? Check all that apply.

A. _____ They ask me questions about why I am in college at this time of life.

B. _____ They treat me like any other student.

C. _____ They specifically solicit my input in class discussions by virtue of my age and experience.

D. _____ They seem to resent my presence in the class.

E. _____ They seem to value my presence in the class.

F. _____ Other _____

25. In general, how do you and your academic advisor interact? Check all that apply:

A. _____ We meet only to complete registration procedures.

B. _____ We meet frequently and have developed a satisfying working relationship.

C. _____ My advisor doesn't seem to understand my goals.

D. _____ My advisor seems eager to support my goals.

E. _____ Other _____

26. Have you and your advisor discussed your post-graduation plans?

_____yes _____no

27. Has your advisor recommended that you visit another office or person on campus for assistance with post-graduation planning? _____yes _____no

28. Have you ever discussed life after graduation with anyone?

_____yes _____no If you answered "yes," with whom did you discuss them? _____

29. Is there any other comment you would like to make at this time about planning for life after graduation? _____

Written Questionnaire for Participants with a Completed Degree

Directions: Please answer each question in this section by filling in a blank or placing a check before one or more responses offered in answer to the question.

1. What is your name?

2. How old are you now? _____

3. In what year did you enter college for the first time? _____

4. If you completed your degree at a later time in your life, in what year did you re-enter college? _____

5. In what year did you complete your degree? _____

6. From what college did you graduate?

7. Where is your alma mater located?

8. What was your major?

9. If you had a minor, what was it?

10. Did you seek financial aid to pay college costs? _____yes _____no

11. Were you employed while in school? _____yes _____no

12. Were you retired while in school? _____yes _____no

13. Did your college have a special program or office to attract and offer services to students over 60? _____yes _____no _____not sure

14. Why did you pursue a degree in the third age of your life (over 60)? Check all that apply:

I. _____ I needed a credential for a job or vocation I wanted to pursue.

J. _____ I needed the undergraduate degree in order to pursue graduate study.

K. _____ I wanted to finish an endeavor begun earlier in my life.

L. _____ I had an interest in a particular field of study that I wanted to pursue.

M. _____ I wanted to keep my mind actively engaged.

N. _____ I wanted to use time in a productive way.

O. _____ I wanted to fulfill a lifelong dream.

P. _____ Other(s) _____

15. When you entered college, what did you expect to do or plan to do, after finishing your degree? Check all that apply:

F. _____ Go on to graduate study.

G. _____ Get a job, either part-time or full-time

H. ☐ Participate in volunteer work in my community.

I. ☐ I didn't think about it.

J. ☐ Other _____

16. When you completed your degree, did you follow your plan?

☐ yes ☐ no

17. If you answered "no" to the previous question, explain what you did that deviated from your plan or expectation for post-graduation activity.

18. Did your family support your decision to pursue a degree?

☐ yes ☐ no

19. Did your friends support your decision to pursue a degree?

☐ yes ☐ no

20. Who offered you "emotional" support during your years of study? Check all that apply:

J. ☐ Spouse

K. ☐ Children

L. ☐ Friends

- M. _____ Neighbors
- N. _____ Co-workers
- O. _____ Other students
- P. _____ Pastor or local clergy
- Q. _____ Academic advisor
- R. _____ Other(s) _____
- _____
- _____

21. While taking classes, did you have a "social group" among your classmates?

_____yes _____no

22. While taking classes, did you meet other students in your age group

(over 60)? _____yes _____no

23. While taking classes, did you participate in any campus clubs or activities?

_____yes _____no

24. In general, how did your younger classmates react to you? Check all that apply:

F. _____ They asked me questions about why I was in college at this time of life.

G. _____ They paid me no special attention.

H. _____ They included me in informal conversations.

I. _____ They asked my advice about their own issues or concerns.

J. _____ Other _____

25. In general, how did your instructors react to you? Check all that apply.

G. _____ They asked me questions about why I was in college at this time of life.

H. _____ They treated me like any other student.

I. _____ They specifically solicited my input in class discussions by virtue of my age and experience.

J. _____ They seemed to resent my presence in the class.

K. _____ They seemed to value my presence in the class.

L. _____ Other _____

26. In general, how did you and your academic advisor interact? Check all that apply:

F. _____ We met only to complete registration procedures.

G. _____ We met periodically and developed a satisfying working relationship.

H. _____ My advisor didn't seem to understand my goals.

I. _____ My advisor seemed eager to support my goals.

J. ☐ Other _____

27. Did you and your advisor discuss your post-graduation plans?

☐ yes ☐ no

28. Did your advisor recommend that you visit another office or person on

campus for assistance with post-graduation plans? ☐ yes ☐ no

29. Prior to your graduation, did you discuss life after graduation with anyone?

☐ yes ☐ no If you answered "yes," with whom did you discuss
them?

30. Is there any other comment you would like to make at this time about your
planning for life after graduation?

Preparation for the Interview for Participants Now Seeking a Degree

Directions: The following questions may require more thought and more substantial responses. They will be asked in the face to face interview and are included with this survey only to provide you with the opportunity to think about them in advance of the interview. Please keep these questions and any notes you care to jot down in preparation for the face to face interview.

1. Looking forward to life after college, how do you think it might be different from the life you are leading now?
2. What are you doing now to prepare for life after college?
3. If you need help with this planning, where will you go to get it?
4. What aspects of college "life" do you enjoy most?
5. What aspects of college "life" do you enjoy least?
6. What advice would you offer to other students in your age group as they begin a college career or return to college after many years?
7. What advice would you offer to those who teach them?
8. Do you feel that your college experience is worthwhile? Why or why not?
9. If you had it to do over again, would you enter (or re-enter) college at this time of your life? Why or why not?
10. After you have completed your degree, how do you expect to maintain intellectual activity?

11. Why have you agreed to participate in this research on undergraduate experience in the third age of life?
12. What other comments would you like to make about your collegiate experience or about life after college?

Preparation for the Interview for Participants with a Completed Degree

Directions: The following questions may require more thought and more substantial responses. They will be asked in the face to face interview and are included with the written survey only to provide you with the opportunity to think about them in advance of the interview. Please keep these questions and any notes you care to jot down in preparation for the face to face interview.

1. Looking back on your collegiate experience, how might you have been helped to prepare for life after college?
2. What aspects of the college experience did you enjoy most?
3. What aspects of the college experience did you enjoy least?
4. What advice would you offer to other students in your age group as they begin a college career or return to college after many years?
5. What advice would you offer to those who teach them?
6. Do you feel that your college experience was worthwhile? Why or why not?
7. If you had it to do over again, would you complete your degree? Why or why not?
8. How have you maintained intellectual activity since completing your degree?
9. Why have you agreed to participate in this research on undergraduate experience in the third age of life?
10. What other comments would you like to make about your collegiate experience or life after college?

Interview Questions for Participants Now Seeking a Degree

- 1. Why did you decide to enter (or re-enter) college at this time of your life?**
- 2. Did you make this decision on your own or were others involved in the decision?**
- 3. How did family and friends react to your decision?**
- 4. What advice would you offer to other students in your age group as they begin a college career or return to college after many years?**
- 5. What advice would you offer to those who teach them?**
- 6. Do you feel that your college experience is worthwhile? Why or why not?**
- 7. What aspects of the college experience do you enjoy most?**
- 8. What aspects of the college experience do you enjoy least?**
- 9. If you had it to do over again, would you enter (or re-enter) college at this time of life? Why or why not?**
- 10. At the time you entered college, what did you expect to do or plan to do after finishing your degree?**
- 11. How important was that consideration to you at that time?**
- 12. How has its importance changed as you have moved ahead in your academic program?**

13. What sort of discussions have you have about your post-graduation plans with your academic advisor or with another college staff member?
14. How did the conversation(s) come about?
15. Do you ever participate in discussions with your classmates about post-graduation plans—theirs and yours?
16. What sorts of questions do your friends and family ask you about your post-graduation plans?
17. When you felt like talking about life after college, whom do you think is best suited to help you think about and plan for life after college?
18. Did you ever attend a workshop or seminar about life after college?
19. Did you think it necessary to “do” anything in particular after you completing your degree?
20. How might you anticipate using your college degree?
21. What do you think you might do after finishing your degree to maintain intellectual activity?
22. Do you think your family and friends, your college, and society in general expect something different from you after you have completed the degree?
23. Will you expect something different from yourself?
24. Why have you agreed to participate in this research on undergraduate experience in the third age of life?
25. What should I know that I haven't asked to help me understand your perspective about life after college?

Interview Questions for Participants with a Completed Degree

- 1. Why did you decide to enter (or re-enter) college at this time of your life?**
- 2. Did you make this decision on your own or were others involved in the decision?**
- 3. How did family and friends react to your decision?**
- 4. What advice would you offer to other students in your age group as they begin a college career or return to college after many years?**
- 5. What advice would you offer to those who teach them?**
- 6. Do you feel that your college experience is worthwhile? Why or why not?**
- 7. What aspects of the college experience do you enjoy most?**
- 8. What aspects of the college experience do you enjoy least?**
- 9. If you had it to do over again, would you enter (or re-enter) college at this time of life? Why or why not?**
- 10. At the time you entered college, what did you expect to do or plan to do after finishing your degree?**
- 11. How important was that consideration to you at that time?**
- 12. How has its importance changed as you have moved ahead in your academic program?**
- 13. What sort of discussions have you have about your post-graduation plans with your academic advisor or with another college staff member?**

14. How did the conversation(s) come about?
15. Do you ever participate in discussions with your classmates about post-graduation plans—theirs and yours?
16. What sorts of questions do your friends and family ask you about your post-graduation plans?
17. When you felt like talking about life after college, whom do you think is best suited to help you think about and plan for life after college?
18. Did you ever attend a workshop or seminar about life after college?
19. Did you think it necessary to “do” anything in particular after you completing your degree?
20. How might you anticipate using your college degree?
21. What do you think you might do after finishing your degree to maintain intellectual activity?
22. Do you think your family and friends, your college, and society in general expect something different from you after you have completed the degree?
23. Will you expect something different from yourself?
24. Why have you agreed to participate in this research on undergraduate experience in the third age of life?
25. What should I know that I haven’t asked to help me understand your perspective about life after college?

Focus Group Moderator's Guide

August 19, 2000

1. Introductions—name tags, name tents, and lunch

2. Formal welcome

- **Statement of purpose: interaction sometimes surfaces ideas that did not emerge in individual interviews;**
- **most general topic of discussion is “life after college: what next?”**
- **more specifically, how can colleges help third age students plan for life after college?**

3. Guidelines to follow during the discussion

There are just a few guidelines I'll ask you to follow during the focus group interview.

- **You do not need to speak in any particular order. When you have something to say, do so.**
- **Please do not speak when someone else is speaking, even if you're dying to interrupt with a related idea.**
- **Do not become engaged in side conversations with another person while someone has the floor.**
- **Certainly take time to express your thought, but be as succinct as possible to give everyone a chance to contribute.**

- There are no “right/wrong” answers; everyone’s point of view is valid, so you may surely disagree, but try to do so without criticizing another person’s perspective.
 - Since our time is limited, my role as moderator is to redirect the discussion if it becomes sidetracked, to encourage everyone to participate, and make it possible for everyone to do so.
 - Any questions?
4. Warm-up: Let’s go around the circle, introduce yourself, tell where you live, how long you’ve been a student or when you graduated, what your major is or was...
5. Easing into questions:
- I’d like to ask those who are currently pursuing a degree to ‘reflect forward’ and tell us what you are thinking now that you might do after graduation or what you envision life after graduation to be like.
 - I’d like to ask those who have completed their degree to ‘reflect backward’ on your life since graduation and tell us if there is anything you would do differently if you had a chance to turn back the clock.
6. More substantial question: From the individual interviews I conducted with you and those not present today, I learned that being in school is so totally consuming that most do not have time or energy to invest in post-graduation planning while still enrolled. However, in the year following graduation,

some like to have contacted one or two faculty members or Adult Programs staff, but hesitated to intrude on that person's time with current students and other responsibilities. After learning this in the interviews, my new question is this: *What policies, procedures, or mechanisms could a college or university put into place to assure you access to people and services for a year or more while you are moving into the next phase of your life—and make you feel comfortable enough to draw upon those resources?*

7. One of my interviewees expressed surprise that I did not ask a question in the individual interview about AGEISM, so I decided to include it in the focus group discussion. A gerontologist named Robert Butler—no relation—coined the term “ageism” in 1969, to refer to prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory practices, and institutional policies and practices. Sexism can also be a factor in ageism since most older people are women. The question is this: *Have you experienced “ageism” or “age bias” on the college campus as you pursued your college degree?*
8. [If time remains....] Many of my interviewees have expressed interest in writing for publication, in artistic or musical endeavors. In trying to think of a way to capitalize on all this creativity, I'm beginning to think that one outcome of our venture might be a joint publication for which I'd write the introduction and compile your contributed chapters. What do you think of that idea?

9. **Wrap-up:** Our time is running out, so let me summarize the key ideas I've heard..... There were also a couple of points mentioned that we did not have time to follow up on.....

10. **Member check key ideas...** Go round the room quickly to ascertain members' feelings about the ideas

11. **Closing statements**

- **Reminder that tape will be transcribed and you will be assigned an anonymous identification on the audiotape.**
- **Find out if anonymity is an issue, since we may use the videotape to promote our research project and through it, collegiate education for older adults.**
- **Thank you for your many contributions to this project and here is another small token of my appreciation...**

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