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Why they persis: exploring the educational experiences of adult women currently enrolled part time at a Midwest community college

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**Why they persist: Exploring the educational experiences of adult women
currently enrolled part time at a Midwest community college**

by

Elizabeth Michelle Cox

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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2007

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Dedication

For all of the support,
encouragement,
love,
caring,
and company throughout this journey –
this dissertation is dedicated to my husband and partner,

Joseph.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose Statement.....	5
Research Questions	5
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Significance of the Study	7
Definitions of Key Terms	8
Summary	8
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	11
The Issue of Retention	11
The Institution.....	11
The Individual.....	13
Interactionist Theory of Student Departure.....	14
Theory of Involvement.....	15
Nontraditional Student Attrition.....	17
Adult Students	18
Theory of Capital	23
Women's Knowing and Development.....	25
Silent Women.....	27
Received Knowers	27
Subjective Knowers.....	28
Procedural Knowers.....	28
Constructed Knowers	29
Feminist Standpoint.....	30
Summary	32
CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES	33
Qualitative Approach	33
Epistemology	34
Theoretical Framework.....	35
Methodology	37
Trustworthiness and Quality Criteria Strategies.....	39
Credibility	40
Transferability.....	41
Dependability	42
Confirmability	42

Methods and Data Collection.....	43
Research Site	46
Participant Selection.....	47
Summary	49
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	52
Participant Profiles.....	53
Annie	54
Melanie.....	55
Shelley	56
Linda	57
Jen	58
Summary of Participants	60
Themes and Analysis	62
Influence of Family and Friends	63
The Balancing Act.....	70
Learning Environments	74
Aspirational Capital	79
Summary with Research Questions	83
Discussion of Feminist Standpoint.....	89
Document Analysis	90
Summary	91
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	92
Conclusions.....	92
Educational Experiences.....	93
Factors Contributing to Decisions to Persist.....	95
Contributions to the Literature	97
Limitations	98
Recommendations for Practice.....	99
Recommendations for Future Research.....	103
CHAPTER 6 REFLECTIONS.....	105
REFERENCES	108
APPENDIX A INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT	116
APPENDIX B INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	119

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Demographics, Major, and Employment Status 53

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. This study sought to expand the research on student retention by describing the perspectives of adult female students who are enrolled part time at a community college in the Midwest. Through the guiding framework of feminist standpoint theory this study described, interpreted, and analyzed the educational experiences of the adult female participants.

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

Introduction

Community colleges have become a popular destination for adult women (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000). Community colleges' convenience of location, inexpensive cost, and quality of education have given adult women the opportunity to pursue higher education at a community college, yet little is known about the experiences of this particular group of students at U.S. community colleges. In 2006 adult learners, or those 25 years of age or older, accounted for nearly 4 million, or 30%, of all undergraduates in the United States (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Adult learners have had an even greater impact in the community college population where their numbers have grown from 17% in 1970 to nearly 40% of the total enrollment in 2002 (Paulson & Boeke). Additionally of the 6.6 million students enrolled for credit in community colleges in the United States, 60% are enrolled part time; 43% of that population are adults 25 years of age or older (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

This growth in adult student enrollment in the United States can be attributed to three change factors: demographic, social, and technological (Shere, 1988). The most notable demographic change has been the relative stagnation in the number of high school graduates. The number of 18-year-olds in the American population peaked in 1979 and has been steadily decreasing since (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In order to make up for the lack of "traditional-age" students, postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, have expanded programs and recruitment

efforts to attract adult students, defined as those age 25 years of age and older (American Council on Education [ACE], 2005; Cohen & Brawer; Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Societal change, for example the increasing number of women who have entered the paid workforce, social acceptability for career change, and increased longevity in the labor market, has encouraged increasing numbers of adults to consider postsecondary education (Shere). In addition, scientific and technological advances have created and eliminated entire industries; for instance the growth of computer network security companies and bioengineering firms and the decline of labor intensive manufacturing jobs, within one generation pushing adults to upgrade skills or face job obsolescence (Aslanian, 2001). Given that none of these change factors are decreasing, adult students will continue enrolling in postsecondary institutions for years to come (Paulson & Boeke).

Since 1970, women's postsecondary undergraduate enrollment has increased more than twice as fast as men's enrollment (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). In fact, women are currently 58% of total community college enrollment and 62% of community college enrollment for those 25 years of age and older (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). The percentage of undergraduate enrollment for women is projected to continue to grow faster than it is for men (NCES, 2006).

Historically, postsecondary institutions have developed programming to serve full-time students entering their doors directly from high school (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The passage of the Higher Education Act (1965) and other reforms during the 1960s and 1970s brought more adult students to college

campuses than ever before causing institutions to rethink their policies and practices (Schlossberg et al.). Researchers have suggested that programs that have been developed to meet the needs of adult learners are really cleverly disguised attempts to morph adult learners into traditional models (Terrell, 1990). Holding an orientation session in the evening and labeling it as an adult student orientation but not changing the content to topics more applicable to adult students, is an example of this morphing.

Projections indicate that after 2010 the numbers of adult students enrolling at postsecondary institutions will grow faster than those of traditional-age students (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). The time has come for a more thorough examination of the postsecondary educational experiences of adult learners in order to see if their retention needs are being addressed or simply being swept under the rug of traditional-age student retention models.

Statement of the Problem

Two of the most influential theories shaping student retention policies and practices, Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, are based on the traditional-age, full-time, residential student population. Postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, have often relied on these theories to design retention policies and practices (ACE, 2005), thus they have been designing and implementing retention policies and practices based on models that do not necessarily apply to adult, part-time, female learners. This may be one explanation why institutions serving large

numbers of part-time, adult, female learners, like community colleges, have retention rates that hover around 50% (ACE).

Previous studies have identified reasons why adults decide to enter or re-enter postsecondary education—reasons that include improving job skills, personal enrichment, and even fulfilling a lifelong desire for education (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Yet adult learners are different from traditional-age students in several other ways including the multiple responsibilities they often have in terms of time, energy, and roles (Lynch & Chickering, 1984). One example of a multiple responsibility (Paulson & Boeke), is that the majority of adult learners, 60% of those 30 years of age and over, are married and have at least one child. These multiple roles, like that of parent or spouse, influence adult learners' decisions to pursue education and in what manner (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Although multiple roles are stressful to any adult student, those roles associated with home and family may have an even greater impact on adult women. In Western society men and women are burdened with work while they are at the job, but women begin their second job upon entering the household as they are disproportionately responsible for household chores and child rearing, a phenomenon called the “double day” (Hartsock, 1998). This lopsided responsibility for home and family welfare, particularly when combined with the responsibility of being an employee, may make the role of college student even more burdensome for adult women.

There is insufficient research regarding the factors influencing the decisions of adult women to remain enrolled in postsecondary education. Research has shown

that fewer than 15% of adult students who intended to earn an associate's degree had done so within 5 years of initial enrollment (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). In fact, 46% of nontraditional students seeking an associate's degree were more likely to leave in their first year of enrollment (Choy, 2002). The low rate of persistence at community colleges coupled with the increasing enrollment of adult female students at community colleges warrants an examination of the experiences of adult, female, part-time community college students to inform the subsequent creation of appropriate retention policies and practices.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. Although race and ethnicity may also be factors contributing to a female student's decision to persist in college the focus of this study was only on women.

Research Questions

1. What are the educational experiences of adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program at a community college in the Midwest?
2. What are the factors contributing to the decisions to persist for adult, female, part-time students at the Midwestern community college?

Theoretical Framework

Many existing theories on student retention (e.g., Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975) focus on the collegiate experiences of traditional, full-time, residential students,

which may result in the experiences of part-time students, and in this case, women, being overlooked or potentially devalued. This study used feminist standpoint theory to instead focus on women's experience and privilege women's voices and identities, thus celebrating women's experientially based differences (Prasad, 2005). Feminist standpoint theory scholars challenge researchers to explore ideas and experiences from a *woman-centered* perspective by making women the central focus of study (Prasad). In fact Harding (1987) went further, saying that, "It needs to be stressed that it is *women* who should be expected to be able to reveal *for the first time* what women's experiences are" (p. 7).

A key to being able to better understand a subject's knowing and doing is through utilizing feminist standpoint. Feminist standpoint, also called women's standpoint, is grounded in women's daily experiences and creates a challenge to prevailing ruling points of view by challenging unquestioned and taken-for-granted ways of acting and knowing, which are those honored by the ruling class, in this case, men (Campbell, 2003). One example of this dominant, masculine societal view is that females are more nurturing and thus make "better" parents. Feminist standpoint draws from a feminist grounding as it brings to the foreground women's experiences and their ways of knowing.

This study sought to expand the research on student retention by describing the perspectives of adult female students who are enrolled part time at a community college in the Midwest. Through the guiding framework of feminist standpoint theory this study described, interpreted, and analyzed the educational experiences of the

adult female participants with specific attention to developing appropriate retention models or considerations.

Significance of the Study

Prominent studies regarding college student retention (e.g., Astin, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975) had as their primary focus traditional-age students who attend 4-year institutions and live in residential college environments. However, the majority of students in postsecondary education in the United States are enrolled at community colleges, and the numbers of adult students continue to increase (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Studies focusing on female students at 4-year institutions exist, yet a preliminary review of the literature found little addressing female students at community colleges even though women are the majority of the students enrolled at community colleges (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). Research on college student retention at community colleges is increasing but much of this research has focused on full-time, traditional-age students (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005)—yet the majority of students attending community colleges enroll on a part-time basis. Research that focuses on female, adult, part-time students at community colleges and why they choose to persist is insufficient. This insufficiency in research is summed up with the following statement,

To advance, enhance, and deepen this [retention] knowledge, new questions addressing women's community college experiences must be asked.

Qualitative studies and program evaluations are in especially unique positions to potentially deepen what we already know about women's experiences and the quality of the services provided for them. However, it is not enough to ask

questions about women. What is especially important is that these studies be women-centered; that they consider women's experiences on their own terms rather than as relative to normative definitions based on the dominant cultural experience. (Wolgemuth, Kees, & Safarik, 2003, p. 766)

The need for a qualitative study that utilizes women's voices to explain women's educational experiences is in order, and this study used adult female participants' voices to describe, interpret, and analyze women's educational experiences at a community college.

Definitions of Key Terms

Adult student: a student who is 25 years of age or older. This definition is consistent with the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners (1998)] and other researchers (Aslanian, 2001; Paulson & Boeke, 2006).

Part-time enrollment: enrollment consisting of fewer than 12 credit hours in a given semester. This definition is consistent with that used by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS; NCES, n.d.).

Persistence: City Community College (pseudonym) uses the following definition for fall-to-spring persistence: the number of students registered on the 14th day of school in the fall term that were also registered as of the 14th day of school in the next spring term (Bob Dinear, personal communication, March 6, 2007).

Summary

This study analyzed and interpreted the factors involved in the decision to persist for female, adult, part-time community college students. A theoretical framework based on feminist standpoint theory was utilized in data collection and

analysis in order to explore the unique educational experiences of these women in their own voices and from their own perspectives.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature related to the various components of this study and is divided into two main sections: (a) college student retention theories and their relevance to adult students in the community college context and (b) a synthesis of studies regarding the educational experiences of adult, female college students. The first part of the literature review includes an overview of seminal college student retention theories including those of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984). Next, Bean and Metzner's (1985) student retention theory pertaining to adult students and commuter students is examined. Finally, the applicability of these theories to adult students in the community college context with reference to studies in the literature is discussed and summarized. The second part of the literature review explores literature related to adult female college students and, specifically, their experiences in postsecondary education at community colleges and factors leading to their retention in postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges.

Chapter 3 contains a detailed description of the methodological approach used in this study, philosophical assumptions, participants, sample, data collection methods, design issues, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 4 includes the thematic results of the study along with application of the themes to the research questions that guided this study.

Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of the findings within the context of feminist standpoint, conclusions and limitations of the study, implications for

community colleges regarding retention practices directed toward adult, female, part-time students, as well as recommendations for future research. Chapter 6 comprises my personal reflections and thoughts of the journey I have taken through this research project.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest.

Four themes stand out in the literature as being applicable to this study. First is the concept of retention and why it is so important in today's higher education environment, both for postsecondary institutions and for individual students. The second is the growing population of female adult students, particularly in community colleges, and the unique needs they bring to campus. Third is the theory of capital and how various forms of capital are utilized by different communities. And fourth is feminist standpoint and its applicability to this study.

The Issue of Retention

The Institution

Institutions are concerned about student retention for several reasons. One reason, and perhaps the primary reason in many policymakers' minds, is the economic value of retention both for the institution and for society. Using the Retention Revenue Estimator (Noel-Levitz, n.d.), institutions can calculate the savings they could enjoy by reducing their dropout rate by even a small percentage. These savings are represented by tuition dollars, staff time, bookstore purchases, financial aid investments, and more. As for society, retention of students is important because by dropping out, a student may negatively affect his or her family income,

which “produces a ripple effect on the postsecondary institutions, the workforce, and the economy” (ACE, 2005). For institutions,

Student retention is a win-win situation: the student gains an education and increased lifetime earning and the institution educates a student, fulfilling its missions, and gains tuition income. For these reasons, it makes sense for institutions to invest in retention programming. (ACE, p. 237)

Added to this issue is the trend of retention being a core indicator of institutional performance, with several states tying budget allocation to retention success (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004).

Community colleges have long been regarded as democratic institutions—admitting anyone who would come and bringing educational opportunity to those individuals not welcomed at many other postsecondary institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Among the individuals welcomed at community colleges are those considered low of socioeconomic status, the unemployed, members of minority groups, and new immigrants to the United States. As the people’s college, many community colleges have variations of the following as part of their mission: “Serving all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students” (Vaughan, 2000, p. 3). For many who attend a 2-year institution there is no other choice for postsecondary education but the community college (Cohen & Brawer). If students are not retained at the community college, they may be lost to postsecondary education, and a successful future, completely.

The Individual

The issue of retention is also important to the individual student. Research has shown that obtaining a college degree provides both long- and short-term economic advantages, including increased lifetime earnings (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In fact the average net annual earnings premium for those with an associate's degree (compared with a high school diploma) is about 17.5% for men and about 27% for women. The hourly wage premium is about 13% for men and 22% for women (Pascarella & Terenzini). Earnings surveys conducted from 1984 through 1996 showed that women with an associate degree had an annual earning percentage of 40% over women with a high school degree (Pascarella & Terenzini). Economically, this alone could be reason enough for one to persist in postsecondary education.

Yet researchers have also found that "educational attainment has positive net impacts on dimensions of life that, in turn, increase one's sense of life satisfaction or overall happiness" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 553). These dimensions of life include enhancement of economic affluence, sense of control over one's life, networks of social support, and perceived health status (Pascarella & Terenzini). College-educated individuals also tend to be more involved in their greater communities and civically active.

Evidence also suggests that postsecondary education's influences extend beyond the individuals who attend college to the nature of their children's lives (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This influence is exhibited through college-educated parents providing better quality prenatal care and continues after birth with greater

parental investments in developmentally enriching childcare (Pascarella & Terenzini). Thus the issue of retaining postsecondary students has more far-reaching impacts than merely keeping a student enrolled until graduation.

So what then is retention and how has it been studied? As Hagedorn (2005) pointed out, there are “at least four basic types of retention: institutional, system, in the major (discipline), and in a particular course” (p. 98). Of these four perhaps the most widely adopted definition of retention is the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation. In order to craft an institutional retention plan administrators often turn to research. There are two major themes in retention research: student interaction and student commitment to the academic experience. These themes are evident in the research of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984).

Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure

One of the most widely recognized theories for college student retention is Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure, which was developed from Durkheim’s (1951) social theory of suicide. Tinto (1975) connected this theory with his study of college student persistence. The resulting interactionalist theory of student departure posits that a student’s entry characteristics (e.g., family background, individual demographics) plus her or his commitment to graduation impacts departure decisions. Tinto (1975) examined students’ academic and social integration and theorized that the greater the level of these two measures, the greater the student’s commitment to the institution; the greater a student’s commitment to the institution, the greater likelihood that she or he will persist at the institution.

This theory has been utilized by scholars for over three decades, but recent research (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997) has suggested that although Tinto's (1975) theory may be applicable to residential institutions, the same cannot be said of 2- or 4-year commuter institutions (more often referred to as community colleges). Researchers have found that when tested, only 2 of Tinto's (1975) 13 propositions had empirical backing in the commuter college (community college) setting (Braxton et al.). This finding led the researchers to state, "The problematic nature of support for this theory in commuter institutions [community colleges] justifies its abandonment for application in this institutional setting" (ACE, 2005, p. 68). In fact Tinto (1982) himself acknowledged, "[The theory] is not very sensitive to forms of disengagement that occur within the two-year college sector" (p. 689).

Not only is Tinto's (1975) theory problematic for the study of commuter institutions, like community colleges, but its applicability to the study of adult students is also called into question as it did not distinguish between traditional and adult student departure (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). And yet this theory "enjoys near paradigmatic stature in the study of college student departure" (Braxton, 2000, p. 2). This study will expand on the critiques of the interactionalist theory of student departure and offer further empirical basis by addressing the commuter institution and the distinct needs of adult, women students.

Theory of Involvement

Another area of retention research is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. This theory highlights the importance of students' involvement in various campus activities as an indicator of the "energy a student devotes to the academic

experience” (Astin, p. 297). The more devoted to the academic experience, the better the odds for the student’s persistence. Put more simply, students learn by becoming involved (Shields, 1994). Activities mentioned in relation to Astin’s model include living in residence halls, joining social fraternities and sororities, and participating in athletics.

However adult students are not generally as involved on campus as traditional-age students, especially in the nonacademic areas mentioned above (Solomon & Gordon, 1981). So in terms of Astin’s (1984) student involvement theory, adult students appear to lack the campus involvement that is linked to persistence. Adult students exercise a greater level of campus involvement in the academic realm through activities like contact with faculty, library use, and laboratory work (Solomon & Gordon). Thus, wholesale application of Astin’s theory to adult students is problematic because the type of campus involvement it measures is not pertinent to adult students and thus is not a relevant guidepost from which to measure their potential persistence.

The 2006 Community College Survey of Student Engagement ([CCSSE], n.d.), which included 447 institutions in 46 states, included student engagement data disaggregated by part-time and full-time students. Findings from the report regarding academic engagement include: 49% of part-time students versus 32% of full-time students say they *never* work with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments, and 38% of part-time students versus 25% of full-time students say they *never* talk about career plans with an instructor or advisor (CCSSE). Thus, although research indicates that adult students are more involved in the academic

realm (Solomon & Gordon, 1981), the CCSSE data suggest that institutions need to examine whether those students are enrolled part time or full time to get a clearer picture of their engagement.

Postsecondary institutions that serve adult learners, like community colleges, cannot afford to continue implementing practices based solely on traditional, full-time student theories (Solomon & Gordon, 1981). Population-specific retention practices based on the needs of adult learners are essential to increasing student retention at community colleges. To underpin and provide empirical basis for the development of such practices, research on specific populations, like adult female part-time students, must be conducted.

Nontraditional Student Attrition

One notable theory regarding the college departure process for older students has been developed by Bean and Metzner (1985). These researchers postulated that the decision to persist for older students is influenced by at least one of the following variables: academic performance, intent to leave, environmental variables, and prior academic performance and educational goals (Bean & Metzner). Specifically, Bean and Metzner's theory states that the factors with the greatest impact on adult student attrition are those environmental variables such as hours of employment, family responsibilities, and the encouragement of others (Bean & Metzner). Clearly this theory hits on many of the attrition triggers that may be common to adult students. However, Bean and Metzner were the first to make the point that the variables most responsible for retention will differ from subgroup to

subgroup. Two such subgroups mentioned by Bean and Metzner are women and part-time students.

In an effort to add to the literature on college student retention, the factors influencing the decision to persist for those two subgroups was examined through this study of female, part-time students. It was the intent of this study to contribute to the literature by bringing a deeper understanding of this specific student population as applied to understandings of persistence and retention.

Adult Students

Demographic shifts in the United States, principally the decreasing number of high school graduates, have led to changes in recruitment and retention strategies in postsecondary institutions (ACE, 2005). To address these shifts postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, have expanded programs and recruitment efforts to attract adult students, those 25 years of age and older (ACE; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Paulson & Boeke, 2006).

Attracting older learners has resulted in the sharp increase of adult student enrollment in postsecondary education. A 2006 American Council on Education (ACE) report, stated that in fall 2002, adult learners accounted for approximately 4 million, or 30%, of the nearly 14 million undergraduates enrolled in all postsecondary institutions. Adult students were only 17% of the total community college enrollment in 1970, but by 2002, that proportion had jumped dramatically to 40% of the total community college enrollment (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). In addition, by 2014, adult students will make up 40% of undergraduates in all postsecondary institutions (Paulson & Boeke). If enrollment patterns continue as they have since 1970, adult

learners may soon be the majority of the student body at America's community colleges.

Studies have shown that this dramatic increase in adult student enrollment may prove a great challenge for institutions of higher education as adult learners bring unique needs to the institutional setting (Schlossberg et al., 1989; Solomon & Gordon, 1981). Many other factors differentiate adult learners from traditional-age students:

- A wider range of individual differences, more sharply etched;
- Multiple demands and responsibilities in terms of time, energy, emotions, and roles;
- More, and more varied, past experiences;
- A rich array of ongoing experiences and responsibilities;
- More concern for practical application, less patience with pure theory, less trust in abstractions;
- Greater self-determination and acceptance of responsibility;
- Greater need to cope with transitions and with existential issues of competence, emotions, autonomy, identity, relationships, purpose, and integrity. (Lynch & Chickering, 1984, p. 49)

Clearly adult students differ from their traditional age counterparts, but they are also a very heterogeneous group within themselves (Lynch & Chickering).

A widely held assumption in higher education holds that adult lives follow a linear pattern and that as people age they become more homogenous in their experiences, needs, and goals (Schlossberg et al., 1989). But on the contrary, as

people age they become more heterogenous and diverse, which gives adults more variability, not less, with adult lives making loops instead of following a linear pattern (Schlossberg et al.). One scholar echoed this sentiment of adults looping in and out of higher education stating, “Adults in America today—and even more so in the future—cannot stop learning. They will be back [to institutions of higher education], over and over, throughout their lifetimes” (Aslanian, 2001, p. 57).

The focus of higher education policies has been on traditional-age students for so long that institutions tend to focus on adult students as *students* and neglect the fact that they are also *adults* (Schlossberg et al., 1989). This is problematic because unlike traditional-age students, adult learners see school not as their primary focus but rather as one of the many demands competing for their energy and time (Schlossberg et al.).

Adult students also face different life transitions when enrolling in college (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986). It is true that traditional-age students, especially those matriculating directly from high school to college, are making a transition, but it is generally not of the same magnitude as that of an adult student. Steltenpohl and Shipton contended,

College entry signals transition in adult lives. . . . Adults must make the transition from citizen-in-the-world to student when they enter college. At the same time, they may be negotiating transitions related to self, job, or family. . . . In addition, new adult students lack confidence in their ability to study and learn. They are uncertain about expectations for college-level work. . . . Their

academic skills may be rusty or inadequate. They are strangers in this new world. They do not feel they belong. They feel marginal. (p. 638)

Higher education institutions that enroll adult students must recognize the potential magnitude of this transition for adults and address it with specific adult-focused policies and practices.

There are several reasons that community colleges are a logical choice for adult students (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). As compared to traditional, 18-year-old, first-year college students, adult learners are more often married, are working at least a part-time job, and have childcare or other familial responsibilities (Paulson & Boeke). These characteristics paired with a possible delay in entering, or re-entering, college or poor academic preparation in secondary school make attendance at a predominantly traditional-age, residential institution improbable. By contrast, the community college is committed to open access and offers developmental education, if necessary; flexible scheduling, including part-time enrollment to accommodate working adults; and low tuition prices, all within a short drive of one's home.

The average age of community colleges students, currently 29 (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005), has been declining due to an increase in the enrollment of 17- to 21-year-olds in community colleges. Factors contributing to this increase in traditional-age student enrollment include lower tuition at community colleges and savings incurred by living at home (Phillippe & Sullivan). However, adult learners may soon constitute the majority of students enrolled in America's community colleges (Paulson & Boeke, 2006). This shift in student demographics brings with it many

challenges as adult students bring with them different and multiple experiences, roles, and responsibilities than those of traditional-age students. Adult students also experience different transitions than traditional-age students and have a different focus (Schlossberg et al., 1989) than their younger counterparts. For these reasons community colleges must examine their policies and practices to insure they are helping adult students to meet these challenges and to successfully accomplish their goals.

And yet whereas adult students as a group bring new challenges to campuses, a subgroup of this population, namely adult women, have challenges that may well be different from those faced by adult men. For example, many of the challenges that adult women face when entering, or re-entering, postsecondary education are social in nature (Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991). These social challenges include finding childcare, the presence of negative family attitudes regarding her role as a student, and lack of support—emotionally, financially and physically—from significant others in the woman’s life. This social stress may emanate from the responsibility for the care of children and home that has been historically and disproportionately placed on women (Mikolaj & Boggs). This “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) for women manifests itself when a woman leaves the office or factory and she begins her “second shift” upon coming home. Thus the student role is usually added to domestic, and most likely work, duties causing women to juggle multiple, competing obligations along with student responsibilities. This simultaneous juggling of roles and responsibilities may cause women to experience intrapersonal conflict and role overload. And if a woman does not have the support of family or

spouse, these demands on her are even greater. For these reasons it is important for postsecondary institutions to have a greater understanding of the adult women who come to their campuses.

Theory of Capital

The concept of capital was first utilized in the 1970s to provide an explanation why certain social groups and communities were more successful, particularly in the realm of education, than others. The term “capital” is used to describe the cultural knowledge and skills possessed by privileged groups in society. This capital is accumulated and subsequently shared within the privileged groups in that society. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) developed the theory of cultural capital that asserted there are three types of capital within a given community: cultural (i.e., education), social (i.e., social networks), and economic (i.e., material possessions). The theory further stated that these forms of capital may be acquired either through one’s family ties or through formal schooling. The key to this concept of capital is that only the dominant groups within society have full access to these forms of capital and the knowledge and skills necessary to utilize it for social mobility. Thus, the dominant groups are able to maintain power and prestige in society.

A major critique of this theory of cultural capital is that it has been used to emphasize deficit thinking toward marginalized groups by reinforcing the idea that some groups are culturally wealthy whereas others are culturally poor (Yosso, 2005). This premise establishes White, middle class culture as the standard against which all other cultures are measured, and consequently, deemed inferior. It is against this backdrop that critical race theory (CRT) worked to shift the focus from

White, middle class culture as the norm to the inclusion of the cultures of communities of color (Yosso).

CRT asserted that communities of color are culturally rich and have six of their own forms of capital:

1. Aspirational capital: the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers;
2. Linguistic capital: the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language;
3. Familial capital: cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition;
4. Social capital: networks of people and community resources;
5. Navigational capital: skills of maneuvering through social institutions.

(Yosso, 2005, p. 77)

These forms of capital are not static or exclusionary, but rather are vibrant and living processes that continue to contribute to the communities' cultural resources.

Like communities of color in the theory of cultural capital, adult, female students are often viewed through a deficit model lens. Higher education journals are filled with articles discussing the numerous barriers to participation in postsecondary education that adult women face. These barriers include economic status, lack of support systems, lack of time, finding adequate childcare, and others. A study of women who chose not to participate in higher education found that there was yet another, more daunting barrier that adult women may face called "lack of voice" (Hall & Donaldson, 1997). The researchers described lack of voice as "a

'deterrent' so deeply embedded in some women that no theory can fully capture its meaning. The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self-confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant" (Hall & Donaldson, p. 98). The intent of this current study was to increase the understanding of adult women enrolled part time at a community college by describing, analyzing, and interpreting their educational experiences utilizing their own voices and knowledge. The participants in this study described experiences whereby they had utilized aspirational capital to help them find their voices and assist them on their educational journeys. This concept will be discussed at length in chapter 4.

Women's Knowing and Development

Researchers have become accustomed to listening to men's voices and their experiences and only recently have they discovered the silence of women and the difficulty of hearing women when they do speak (Harding, 1987). This difficulty in hearing women's voices may stem from the assumption that there is only one version of social experience and interpretation (Gilligan, 1982). It is only when researchers realize that there are different experiences and interpretations for women and men that we also realize there are different modes of language and thought for women and men.

The different ways that men and women are socialized—men toward autonomy and women toward connectedness—parallels the differences between male and female ways of knowing. Feminist scholars place an emphasis on connected knowing, a relationship between the knower and the subject of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). The foundation of connected

knowing is built from the belief that “the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 12). Yet in a Eurocentric masculinist society, like the United States, separate knowing, a sense of autonomy and distance between the self and the object of knowing, is valued (Collins, 1989). In institutions of higher education connected learning is not valued; feelings and intuitions are relegated to the private and personal spaces (Belenky et al., 1997)—the same spaces historically relegated to women. Thus masculine ways of knowing and interpreting the world are honored and held up as truth. “Relatively little attention has been given to modes of learning, knowing, and valuing that may be specific to, or at least common in, women” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 6).

This insufficiency in the research on women’s knowing led to the landmark study by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) on women’s development of self, voice, and mind. In particular these researchers realized that, even though the numbers of women attracted to higher education were growing, little attention was given to women’s preferred styles of learning. Drawing upon other research (i.e., Gilligan, 1982) this seminal study concluded that there are five distinct categories for women’s ways of knowing:

1. Silence: women see themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to impulses of external authorities;
2. Received knowledge: women are capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge from omnipotent external authorities but not of creating knowledge themselves;

3. Subjective knowledge: women see truth and knowledge as personal, private and intuitively known;
4. Procedural knowledge: women are invested in learning and active in obtaining and communicating knowledge; and
5. Constructed knowledge: women see all knowledge as contextual and themselves as creators of knowledge. (Belenky et al., 1997)

In order to gain a deeper understanding of each of these distinct ways of knowing, each will be briefly outlined separately.

Silent Women

Silent women hold extreme stereotypes of women and men, such as women belonging in the home and taking care of children whereas men bring home the paychecks that support the family, and defer to authority (especially male). For these women words are not empowering but instead are used to diminish people. Silent women have an extreme reliance on external authority for guidance. These women may have typically found school to be a place that confirmed their fears of being “deaf and dumb” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 34). Thus women holding this viewpoint generally are not found on college campuses. I did not anticipate any study participants holding this viewpoint but some may reflect back on a time when they did so.

Received Knowers

Received knowers are very open to what others have to say and learn best by listening. They are very dualistic, seeing only one correct answer to a question, and often have very little confidence in trusting their own voice. Received knowers see

the kind of learning one gets through schooling as receiving, retaining, and returning the words of authorities as these authorities have received these “truths” from a still higher authority (Belenky et al., 1997). They hold the position that all knowledge is developed outside of the self. Thus these women may feel incapable of completing original work as they look to others for guidance and information. Received knowers are often the first to drop out of intellectually challenging environments and are especially susceptible to an authority’s judgment.

Subjective Knowers

Women who subscribe to subjective knowledge are still dualistic, believing there is still only one correct answer, but think that truth lies within a person. These women rely on their intuition to supply the right answer. Many of these women may have experienced failed relationships with men that compelled them to turn inward and listen to their “gut” to figure out what was right for their lives. Subjective knowers see truth as something that is experienced, not constructed; they see themselves as conduits for truth, not constructors of truth. Unlike silent and received knowers, subjective knowers see truth only for the individual and not as an absolute for everyone. Students who are subjective knowers may be seen as arbitrary, inflexible, and unmanageable.

Procedural Knowers

Procedural knowing generally develops after subjective knowers encounter situations in which their old ways of knowing were challenged. For example, if a woman trusted her gut instinct that it was a good idea to get involved in a relationship that ended poorly she may then realize that her gut feelings are fallible.

Women in this type of knowing may lose the tone of authority in their voice; their inner voice may actually become critical and tell them their ideas are stupid. Thus, procedural knowers may not speak up at all. These women, however, are not passively silent; they are active in acquiring the procedures for obtaining knowledge. Procedural knowers think that each person has a distinct way of looking at the world differently. These women are practical problem solvers who think through every option before acting.

Constructed Knowers

Women constructivists move beyond the dualistic “either/or” thinking into a place where they embrace all the pieces of themselves and develop a voice of their own. It is through this developing and sorting that these women discover the foundation of constructivist thought: “All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 137). These women realize that questions and answers vary from individual to individual and that one’s way of seeing the world changes. For women constructivists experts must ground their recommendations and theories in everyday life and be able to explain those to ordinary people; otherwise, that expert knowledge is useless. Women who are constructed knowers sense they are on an endless quest for learning. Women constructivist students need and value attentive and understanding environments in which their voices will be heard.

An understanding of the different types of knowing assisted me in developing relationships with participants as it helped me appreciate, and perhaps empathize, with their experiences and consequent viewpoints. Recognition of the ways of

knowing also promoted the development of probing questions during interviews. Regardless of her way of knowing, each of the women had unique educational experiences that contributed to her individual standpoint.

Feminist Standpoint

Feminist scholars state that women, regardless of race, class, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, share a history of patriarchal oppression through the political economy (Collins, 1989). There are contrasts between male and female voices; there is a distinction between those two as women and men experience relationships and other areas of life differently. “The position of women is structurally different from that of men and . . . the lived realities of women’s lives are profoundly different from those of men” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 106).

Women’s work in every society is systematically different from men’s (Hartsock, 1998). Even though men and women may be oppressed by the western capitalist system, great differences remain: Men are immersed in the work world only during his time at the job whereas women begin their second job upon returning to the home. Hartsock called this the phenomenon of the “double day” (p. 114). This double day means that the process of production or work does not consume a man’s whole life, as it does for a woman. “In capitalism, women contribute both production for wages and production of goods in the home” (Hartsock, p. 113). So although there are differences among women by class and race, there are still commonalities present as women share the burden of being responsible for both housework and wage work outside of the home.

The development of women's and men's personalities are affected by different "boundary experiences, differently constructed and experienced inner and outer worlds" (Hartsock, 1998, p. 117). These different experiences structure and reinforce male and female epistemology and ontology leading to different understandings and constructions of social relations and thus to a feminist standpoint. Feminist standpoint "expresses female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations" (Hartsock, p. 124). Because knowledge is developed through individual experience, there will be different knowledges, but the development of these knowledges, and resulting standpoints, will be similar. "Conventional feminine goodness means being voiceless as well as selfless" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 167). Nice girls fulfill other people's expectations but when women focus on this effort to be good it may prevent them from developing their authentic voice (Belenky et al., 1997). Women feel they are supposed to learn things the way that men see them. This does not help women make sense of their own experiences. Women need to find their own voices and words in order to make meaning of their experiences. It is my hope that through their participation in this study each woman realized that her voice holds power and significance not just for herself but for other adult women enrolled at community colleges. I hope to have helped them become aware of their significance by explaining that the results of this study will deepen the understanding of their educational experiences while adding to the literature regarding retention policies and practices for adult women enrolled at community colleges.

Summary

This chapter has outlined several theories that provide a foundation upon which this study was developed. I do want to clarify that going forward the guiding theoretical framework for this study was feminist standpoint.

This study builds on the existing literature on college student retention in two specific ways. First, by describing, analyzing, and interpreting the educational experiences of adult women community college students this study adds their voices to the literature, an addition that is overdue. This addition is vital, for adult women's experiences are lacking in the literature regarding college student retention theory, a theory upon which many institutional retention policies and practices are based. This study also adds adult, female community college students' voices to the literature regarding adult student retention by incorporating the personal knowledge of the double day, second shift, and other phenomenon this group of women experience as part of their lives as family members, care givers, and college students.

Second, the qualitative, phenomenological approach for this study adds to the literature by allowing the participants to explain, in their own voices, the factors influencing their decisions to remain enrolled at the community college. This approach makes available the details of each woman's way of knowing and individual knowledge of her educational experiences, which increases the understanding of the retention needs and challenges for this distinctive student population. This expanded understanding may then be utilized by institutions, particularly community colleges, to inform retention policy and practice.

The methods and procedures for this study are detailed in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In this chapter a description of the methodological approach for this study is outlined. This chapter also includes discussions of the epistemological approach, trustworthiness, quality criteria strategies, theoretical framework of the study, methods, data collection, and analyses. Finally, site and participant selection is overviewed.

Qualitative Approach

The purpose of this study was to describe the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. Unlike a positivistic approach, qualitative research was an appropriate research tradition for this study. The positivist tradition requires the researcher to be distant from her object of study and to keep emotion out of the study (Collins, 1989). In contrast, in qualitative research the primary goal is to build a relationship with the study participants in order to understand their meaning of experiences and situations (Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative researchers are interested in not only exploring the meaning of experience for participants but also discovering how participants make sense of events and interpreting these meanings. This process of co-construction of knowledge takes place in the participant's natural setting enabling the researcher to become acquainted with the context within which the research takes place (Creswell, 2003). This study utilized a qualitative research approach in order to explore the educational experiences that the women students have at the

community college and the meaning they make from these experiences. This study also made use of the participants' voices to describe, analyze, and interpret the factors contributing to their decisions to persist at the community college.

Epistemology

Epistemology is, "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). The epistemological approach guiding this qualitative study was constructionism. Constructionism is defined as, "the view that *all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world*" (Crotty, p. 42). Thus meaning is not discovered, as in the positivist tradition, but constructed by humans as they engage in and interact with their world. After all, the term human being literally means "being-in-the-world" (Crotty, p. 45). Constructionists do not create meaning; rather, meaning is constructed through work with the world and the objects in that world. Because of this essential relationship between experience and its object, no object can be isolated from the human experiencing it. This revelation then opens the door for each human to make sense of the same reality in very different ways (Crotty), including the researcher who is an active constructor of meaning. Constructionism addresses this idea by clearly stating that there is not one true or valid interpretation of reality. This epistemological approach was appropriate for this study as it required the researcher to explore each individual's experience and interpretation of the phenomenon under study and not simply rely on one experience as the true reality.

Theoretical Framework

As outlined in chapter 1, the theoretical framework guiding this study was feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint, which is grounded in women's daily experiences, creates a challenge to ruling points of view by challenging unquestioned and taken-for-granted ways of acting and knowing, which are those honored by the ruling class, in this case, men (Campbell, 2003). Feminist standpoint draws from a feminist grounding as it brings to the foreground women's experiences and their ways of knowing.

The feminist research tradition began as a sociopolitical movement with the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Prasad, 2005). Early feminist scholars, including Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, influenced the feminist movement in postsecondary institutions in the form of Women's Studies departments and programs. Soon feminist scholars were found in many disciplines like literature, history, and sociology. By the 1980s and 1990s, a feminist scholarly framework was being used in areas of management, organizational theory, and consumer economics (Prasad).

A central tenant to feminism is that women's identities are socially constructed and, when compared to the socially accepted male norm, these female identities are seen as deviant and thus devalued (Prasad, 2005). The basic underpinning of feminist research is to focus on women's own experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. Feminist research presents ideas from a woman-centered perspective with a commitment to invoking change for women. This change is brought about through an increase in the understanding of women's

histories, knowledge, and experiences (Pillow, 2002). Feminist standpoint is a branch of feminist research that has a central goal of, “modify[ing] social arrangements in such a way as to make them more compatible with women’s needs” (Prasad, p. 161). This type of feminist research refuses to recognize male-only experience as the basis for understanding societal interactions and structures. Instead, feminist standpoint highlights the role that male experience has played in the formation of what has become valued as knowledge in our society. Feminist standpoint does this through recognizing and celebrating women’s experientially based differences and privileging women’s voices and identities with the ultimate goal of changing social arrangements to make them more compatible with women’s characteristic needs (Prasad).

However, feminist standpoint scholars continue to grapple with the relationship between race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality to feminist theory and research and are often criticized for being too essentialist in their application of a singular, feminine experience. Feminist researchers must therefore be aware of the issue of multiple identities and how that may lead to multiple oppressions and experiences (Ward, 2004). Still, however connected the researcher may feel to her respondents, she needs to be wary of ““bury[ing] the differences of our social relations under an idealistic façade” (Bloom, 1998, p. 55).

This feminist standpoint was a critical component of this research of the educational experiences of adult female students at the community college, as phenomenology explores accounts from the standpoint of the participants and, in

that research, that meant the everyday experiences of these women were given center stage.

Methodology

To discover more about the educational experiences of adult, female part-time students in the community college, a phenomenological approach was employed. The primary focus of phenomenology is on the subjective experience of the individual with the underlying purpose of understanding the very essence of a phenomenon for the individual (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Researchers who employ a phenomenological methodology maintain that a person and his or her world are interrelated. Thus researchers utilizing this methodology do not focus on the individual in the study nor the world in which that individual resides but instead on the meaning of the interaction between the two (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). It is the job of the phenomenological research then to discover and interpret this interaction as it is understood by the subject. Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences for the individual, in the individual's words, not explanations or analyses of that experience using the researcher's language (Moustakas).

Phenomenological researchers focus on common, everyday experiences or experiences that a given group of people may have in common. In this study I concentrated on the experiences of female, adult, part-time students who were currently enrolled at a community college in an effort to describe that phenomenon from their perspectives as those who have experienced it.

Phenomenology utilizes the interview as the primary method of data collection, as this is a way for the researcher to discover the actual essences and meanings of an individual's experiences. Before beginning the interview process, however, phenomenological researchers usually take part in an exercise called bracketing (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Bracketing is a practice whereby the researcher examines her own experiences, prejudices, and viewpoints and then sets them aside, or brackets them, so they do not influence the interview process by imposing meaning to the experience from the outside (Merriam & Associates). This process was very important for me as I have had experience working in the community college setting plus, although it was not in the community college context, I have experienced being an adult, female, part-time student. Prior to beginning any interviews, I completed a thorough examination of my experiences, biases, and assumptions to insure they did not taint my interpretation of the subjects' experiences.

Three procedures were utilized for data analysis in this phenomenological study: phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Phenomenological reduction is a process in which the researcher continues to focus on the essence of the individual's experiences to discover the meaning of these experiences for themselves. Horizontalization is the stage when all data are treated as having equal importance and weight before being clustered into themes. Imaginative variation entails the examination of the data from various perspectives and frames of reference (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the

phenomenological researcher constructs a synthesis of the descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Merriam & Associates).

Data analysis included the use of open and focused coding along with member checking. Open coding is the process in which the researcher works intensely with the data, going line by line to identify themes and categories of interest (Esterberg, 2002). This was performed by repeatedly reading through the data and organizing similar material into sections or themes. Focused coding, which entails concentrating on themes identified during open coding (Esterberg), was then applied to enrich the identified themes with quotations and context from interview transcripts. Finally, member checking was used to check “the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants [felt] that they are accurate” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Member checking was performed with participants via email with each participant receiving the results section pertaining to her interviews. This process of data analysis assisted me in keeping the women students’ experiences and interpretations in their voices and as the focus of the study.

Trustworthiness and Quality Criteria Strategies

Conventional, quantitative research utilizes the following criteria for the establishment of trustworthiness: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, qualitative scholars have argued that these criteria are not appropriate for naturalistic research and instead have proposed the use of the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability

(Lincoln & Guba) for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Strategies that were utilized in this study to address these terms are addressed individually.

Credibility

Credibility, the acceptance of findings and interpretations as credible, was addressed by the use of prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. Prolonged engagement requires the researcher to remain in a setting long enough so that “the context is thoroughly appreciated and understood” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). Prolonged engagement also gives the researcher time to build trust, which is imperative for this study. My experiences at a community college and as an adult, female, part-time student provided me with a general understanding of the community college context and of being an adult student. However, I remained in the field for 4 weeks in order to gain a deep understanding of the particular context of the study site and to build trust with each of the study participants.

Triangulation is one method qualitative case study researchers use to find the best possible interpretation. One scholar wrote that

triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. But acknowledging that no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable, triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the case is being seen. (Stake, 2005, p. 454)

Triangulation includes multiple data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and physical evidence. I interviewed each participant three times with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour in length. I also requested that each

participant keep a journal of her educational experiences between our interview sessions. These journal entries served as content for interview questions and discussion as well as another source of participant data. And finally, I utilized a peer debriefer, a disinterested inquirer who explores meanings and biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to further establish the study's credibility.

I anticipated hearing some of the same types of stories from the participants as far as barriers to education, challenges faced and overcome, and future goals. But I also prepared to collect data that did not fit with the rest of the women's experiences and, thus, engaged in negative case analysis. Negative case analysis "requires the researcher look for disconfirming data in both past and future observations" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 310). This negative case analysis required me to reanalyze my data and revise any previously formulated hypotheses until I was confident in the findings of the study.

Another method to provide for trustworthiness of the data collected is member checking. Member checking is used to check "the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). I used member checking with each of the study's participants by providing portions of the findings section of the study via email to each woman.

Transferability

Conventional methods of inquiry are expected to make precise statements regarding external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic scholars contend that is not the purpose of naturalistic research instead stating that the purpose of this

strand of research is to provide a detailed description of the time and context within which results were found (Lincoln & Guba). Thus, it is the responsibility of the naturalistic researcher to "provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 316). It was my intention to use thick, rich description in this study such that a firm foundation of data would be available for possible transferability judgments by potential appliers.

Dependability

Naturalistic scholars have argued that the issue of dependability may be addressed utilizing the same strategies as those applied to the issue of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This use of multiple strategies is also called "overlap methods" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 317). As outlined in the credibility section above, this study utilized the strategies of prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking to address these trustworthiness issues.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the establishment that a study's findings, interpretations, and recommendations are supported by data. To accomplish this, naturalistic scholars recommend the use of triangulation, a confirmability audit trail, and a daily reflexive journal kept by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of triangulation as a strategy for this study has been outlined in the credibility section above.

The audit trail is the keeping of records that have been collected, created, and utilized during an inquiry. There are six categories of records that constitute an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): (a) raw data (i.e., written field notes, recorded

materials), (b) data reduction and analysis products (i.e., condensed field notes), (c) data reconstruction and synthesis products (i.e., findings and conclusions), (d) process notes (i.e., methodological notes), (e) materials relating to intentions and dispositions (i.e., personal notes and expectations), and (f) instrument development information (i.e., observation formats and surveys). Although this qualitative study did not produce much material related to the last category, I did keep records from the other five categories for the audit trail purposes.

I maintained a reflexive journal that included the following recommended (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) parts: (a) the schedule and logistics of the study; (b) a personal diary for reflection, speculation, and insights; and (c) a methodological log to record decisions and rationale related to methodological choices.

Methods and Data Collection

Feminist research is personalized as feminists seek to understand their female subjects' lives and experiences. In order to get to that level of understanding, I used in-depth interviews with adult, female participants who were part-time students at the selected community college. A feminist lens was crucial to these interviews as "articulating and analyzing women's experiences and voices" is a critical concern of feminism (Bloom, 1998, p. 7). In particular, I used the three-interview series (Seidman, 1998), which consists of: (a) a focused life history, which establishes the context of the participants' experience; (b) details of the experience, which allows the participant to reconstruct details within context in which it occurs; and (c) reflection as meaning, which allows the participant to reflect on the meaning the experience holds. Because I examined the participants' experiences, the first

step, the focused life history, was not in-depth enough to be a true life history but instead held enough information from the participant's personal history to give context to her interpretations of her educational experiences at the community college. Four of the participants were interviewed three times and one participant was interviewed twice. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The first interview was intended to learn basic demographic and background information and to establish rapport with the participant. The second interview included questions regarding the educational and personal experiences of the participant while attending the institution. The third interview provided an opportunity for the participant to reflect on the meaning she ascribed to her educational experiences while attending the institution.

Interviews were conducted from April to early June 2007 for a total of 5 weeks; City Community College (CCC) was on break for 3 weeks in May. The interviews were tape recorded and each tape was transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then coded using a series of different colored highlighters and analyzed, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

Interviewing is a relationship, and interviewing in the feminist tradition requires an even closer and more personal relationship. I agree with Bloom (1998) who wrote,

I have come to believe that feminist methodology's challenge to researchers to put themselves on the same critical plane as their research respondents is one of the most important practices of feminist methodology and certainly the most difficult to achieve (p. 53).

The concept of “sisterhood” is one that is present in feminist literature—some indicate it is a level of relationship that one should strive to achieve. For my research, I followed this interpretation of “sisterhood”:

Sisterhood, as invoked by Smith, was not a sentimental idea but a way of speaking about the method of working she was developing. This method required relocation of the knower—moving from being an outsider in hearing of women’s lives and troubles to “locating yourself on their side and in their position.” (Campbell, 2003, p. 9)

Given that I had experienced being a part-time, adult, female student I was able to draw upon those experiences to help develop this sisterhood relationship with my respondents. Although my experiences were different from theirs, it at least gave us a common ground from which to build our relationship. Yet my experiences may have also caused me to develop biases and assumptions about what it is like to be an adult, female enrolled part time in postsecondary education. For instance, my own experience as an adult, female enrolled part time was shrouded with feelings of being out-of-place, an outsider, and of being teased. In order to better understand how these experiences and assumptions may have shaped my understanding of the phenomenon under study, I had to insure that I remained reflexive and straightforward about my biases. To put it simply, I had to remember that “what we see is shaped by who we are” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 12).

Generalizability may be seen as a potential limitation as this study focuses on individuals at a single institution. However, qualitative researchers (Bromley, 1986; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Stake, 2005) would argue that knowledge gained from

a particular case can be applied as the reader will construct her or his own knowledge to make the case personally useful. This argument is furthered by the acknowledgement that the primary criterion for selection of a case is the opportunity to learn from the case and not necessarily its representativeness, as “the purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case” (Stake, p. 460).

Research Site

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. The site for this study was a public, community college located in an urban area in the upper Midwest of the United States. City Community College (pseudonym) is a multi-campus institution with sites in urban and rural areas of the state. The site for this study was the campus located in the largest metropolitan area of the state. In the fall of 2006 the downtown campus of CCC enrolled over 3, 300 students; almost half of those students, over 1,700, were females enrolled part time (Bob Dinear, personal communication, March 6, 2007).

Locating a site for this study was not difficult. I am familiar with CCC and had a business relationship with an individual in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, a gatekeeper who assisted me in gaining approval for my study at the site. After investigating the demographics of the downtown campus for CCC it was determined that site would be viable for this study as it provided a large number of part-time,

female students over the age of 25 years available to potentially serve as respondents in the study.

Participant Selection

Study participants were selected through a process called purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which to learn” (Merriam, 1988, p. 48). Purposeful sampling, also called criterion-based sampling, is when a researcher establishes the criteria for individuals to be involved in the case study and then finds a sample that matches those criteria. This sampling method was useful in this phenomenological study as it insured that the study had participants that were over the age of 25 years, female, and currently enrolled part time in a degree or certificate program at a community college in the Midwest.

Due to the personal nature of the study, the recruitment of participants was especially important. The gatekeeper had indicated a willingness to assist in the initial identification of participants through the generation of a master list of those individuals meeting the sampling criteria. Next he helped me connect with the campus provost who, in turn, contacted a faculty member who taught a class in which there were students meeting the criteria for the study. Participants were then personally solicited by me. The snowball sampling that I utilized was not productive as it did not yield a single participant. Overall the process of securing participants was more difficult than I expected. Initially I thought I had 5 participants without much trouble. However, it turned out that one of the original 5 participants did not

show for two interview appointments and did not return phone calls and was thus dropped from the study. I then began the process of replacing her and asked the other participants for recommendations. One participant suggested two women and when I telephoned one, she seemed willing and we scheduled an interview for two days later. She did not show up for the scheduled meeting nor did she return phone calls, so she, too, was dropped from the study. The second woman was contacted via e-mail, which was the only contact information I had received, but did not reply to my messages. I then decided to return to the CCC campus and personally solicit participation, which resulted in securing a 5th participant. There were a total of 5 participants for this study, and that allowed me appropriate time to collect the depth of each participant's experience through the use of Seidman's (1998) three-interview series with each participant. Throughout all 14 completed interviews there were four themes consistently repeated by each of the participants and thus saturation was achieved.

This study was conducted at one community college in the Midwest, which is one limitation of the study. However this concentration on one site enabled me to gather the depth of experience for this particular group of students necessary for a robust phenomenological study. Socioeconomic status, marital status, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and number of dependents were also not used as selection criteria for the sample as an attempt to not limit the pool of participants. This study did not include direct interviewing of non-persisting students as the focus of the study was to examine the factors influencing the decisions to persist for those students who are currently enrolled at the community college, and access to non-

persisting students may have been difficult. However, stories and experiences of non-persisters were gathered from study participants and thus included in the results of the study. The downtown campus for CCC has a solid mix of ethnic diversity, 21% of part-time students in fall 2006 identified as non-White (Bob Dinear, personal communication, March 6, 2007), another reason why this site was chosen and which was somewhat reflected in those individuals volunteering to participate in the study. Detailed information about the study participants will be presented in chapter 4.

Summary

Gender may be relevant in every stage of research—from selecting a topic to writing up findings. I am sure my gender, as a female that has had some leadership experience in a community college, was a factor in the selection of my topic. However, simply being a female did not automatically mean that I understood or had access to all that my study participants were experiencing, an issue called spatial access. Spatial access does not necessarily mean access to the meaning of informant's worlds and means that researchers must be cognizant of the way gender may define appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a given situation (Warren & Hackney, 2000).

Qualitative researchers are advised to take on the role of the “socially acceptable incompetent” when interviewing—friendly and likeable but needing help with understanding meaning (Warren & Hackney, 2000). This advice was helpful in reminding me to not act like an authority when it came to a particular community college's culture or the participants' experiences. Given my personal experience in a community college setting I needed to maintain the idea that I needed assistance

from participants to gain understanding of their individual interpretations and experiences (Warren & Hackney).

Gender may also have advantages and disadvantages in fieldwork (Warren & Hackney, 2000). For instance, because I am female there may be female participants who may want to be overly helpful to me as they may see me as someone who will help bring change to their world. But, there could be females who may see me simply as a troublemaker who wants to disturb a perfectly fine environment. Warren and Hackney touched on these varying aspects when stating that all knowledge is political and gendered—each will have a reason for contributing, which may be political and most certainly will be gendered. Regardless of the gender of the participant, a relationship will be forged that will affect the research process.

There is always a question of who has power in interviewing relationships, but the respondent is not always powerless (Vincent & Warren, 2001). Regardless of who may have the upper hand in the relationship, researchers must analyze their presence in the study and how it may affect data collection and interpretation (Vincent & Warren). Through my limited qualitative, interviewing experience, I had already recognized how my gender may affect my research and subsequent write-up. For example, I had noticed how I seemed to avoid digging into areas when the respondent becomes uncomfortable or uneasy. I knew that this was something that I needed to be well aware of when I interpreted, analyzed, and described the stories of adult, female, part-time students at a community college through the everyday experiences of the women who are living them.

On top of all of this scholarly advice, there is yet more that was quite useful as I began the dissertation data collection and that was an article in which the researcher re-examined her study of working-class American women's life stories and developed seven keys for what she deemed "good enough" research (Luttrell, 2000). The phrase "good enough," in Luttrell's words, means, "thinking about research decisions in terms of what is lost and what is gained, rather than what might be ideal" (p. 500). Qualitative research is not an exact science in which one's goal is to find the definitive truth, and phenomenological work through a feminist lens is certainly not done in the positivist tradition, so allowing my analysis and interpretations to be good enough is okay.

Above all, however, I think it was most important for me to remember that it was not just any person producing this study (Warren, 1988)—it was me. This point was critical when conducting this qualitative study, for it was through my feminist lens that these women's experiences were seen, heard, and interpreted. I needed to be conscious of my biases, my relationships with participants, and my prior experiences and how they affected my research.

In chapter 4, the results of this study are detailed.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. This study sought to expand the research on student retention by describing the perspectives of adult female students who are enrolled part time at a community college in the Midwest. Feminist standpoint theory informed the design and guided the framework of this study as well as reinforced the importance of keeping each woman's story at the center of the study.

The two research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the educational experiences of adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program at a community college in the Midwest?
2. What are the factors contributing to the decisions to persist for adult, female, part-time students at the Midwestern community college?

By conducting individual interviews, analyzing participant journals, and observing campus environments, data were collected to address these questions. This chapter presents the findings of this study beginning with a description of each participant and followed by the major themes and reinforcing evidence.

Participant Profiles

A total of five individuals met the outlined criteria and participated in the study. All participants were 25 years of age or older, female, and enrolled part time at the downtown campus of CCC. Two of the 5 participants were in their 20s and the remaining 3 participants were in their 30s. Three of the 5 participants were single, 1 was married, and 1 was divorced. Only 1 of the 5 participants did not have any children; 2 of the 5 participants had two children each. Three of the 5 participants self-reported their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, 1 self-reported as Black, and the final participant self-reported as Asian/Pacific Islander.

Table 1 provides a summary description of each participant including her employment status. The data in the table were all self-reported. A detailed description of each participant follows; the following profiles provide a brief description of the participants along with other personal information as it is relevant to the study.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics, Major, and Employment Status*

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital Status	# of Children	Academic Major	Employed
Annie	25	Caucasian	Single	0	General Studies	Yes
Melanie	30	Caucasian	Single	1	General Studies	Yes
Shelley	36	African American	Single	1	Entrepreneurship	No
Linda	38	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Married	2	Nursing	No
Jen	26	Caucasian	Divorced	2	Accounting	No

Annie

Annie is the youngest participant in the study at 25 years of age. She is not married, has no children, and has lived her entire life in the area served by CCC. In order to support herself, Annie works two part-time jobs: the 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. shift at a package handling company and then afternoons as a waitress at a local diner. Due to her work schedule, Annie is able to take only night classes at CCC.

When she graduated from high school, Annie first attended a liberal arts college for one semester and then transferred to CCC. Annie explained why she decided to stop out of school:

I stopped because I didn't really know what I wanted to do and I felt very . . . overwhelmed. I kind of was like well, why am I going to school when I really don't know what I want to do, you know? Why am I blowing all this money or excuse me, my parents' money, to go to school when I don't really know what I want to do?

Once she had time to work and figure out what she wanted to do, Annie decided the time had come to return to post-secondary education. She described how she reached the decision to re-enroll:

I was sitting there going like this is not what I want to do for the rest of my life and you know I'm looking at the people who had been in it for awhile or who had been in that and I was just looking at them like do you really want to do this for the rest of your life?

Annie is currently taking general education classes that will transfer to a 4-year institution. Her goal is to become a forensic pathologist.

Melanie

Melanie is 30 years old, single, and employed full time. Melanie has one child, but her parental rights were terminated, and the child was adopted by another family and is no longer with her.

One of the first things Melanie shared with me was that she was recently released from prison where she had served 3.5 years for a drug conviction. She explained that she had dropped out of school after eighth grade and that drugs had played a large role in that decision:

Let's see I'm a recovering drug addict, I've been clean for 5 years. I was active in my addictions for about, for about 12 years so I began at the young age of 11 and uh, like I said I only completed eighth grade. . . . I was off doing other things that I thought were more important.

While she was incarcerated, Melanie realized that she needed to continue her education to "better myself." She described the process of deciding to return to education:

Well just, you know, during my incarceration, you know, we have to do assignments and stuff and the treatment program that I was in, my spelling was terrible and just communicating with others, you know, because I had a small vocabulary. It was really hard to accept myself and so that was one of the main reasons. And, you know, I tried to write a letter home and I just, you know, I realized I hadn't picked up a pen or wrote letters or wrote anything for years! So that kinda just, right there, that's when I made the decision, you know, I need to go back to school

Soon she received her GED and began taking college classes via correspondence through a local community college and has been continuing her postsecondary enrollment ever since. Melanie is pursuing a degree in Human Services and has the goal of being a caseworker for the Department of Human Services.

Shelley

Shelley is 36 years old and a single mom of a 16-year-old daughter. When I asked Shelley to tell me more about her background, she replied, “I come from a poverty-stricken family . . . my mom raised me by herself, seven kids. My mom never finished high school or my father so I’m kinda living out their dreams.” Family is very important to Shelley and although she does not necessarily have childcare issues, she plans her class schedule so that she can be home when her daughter arrives home from school.

Shelley has lived her entire life in the CCC service area. Prior to coming to CCC, she had “a rocky . . . rocky road . . . no ambitions, no drives, no direction.” But after the deaths of her mother and stepmother, Shelley realized that she needed a change in her life and that change was education: “I mean my mom passed away 3 years ago and she never went to college. . . . I just want to take my hardships and make something positive, let my light shine.” Spirituality is very prominent in Shelley’s life and was brought up several times during our conversations. None of the other participants mentioned spirituality or its role in their lives during our interviews. An example of the role of spirituality in Shelley’s life was when we talked about support systems and getting through tough times and she said,

I don't want to, you know, take all the credit 'cause I had to lean on God a lot. . . . I know that God has got something really big for me and I just want to make sure that I'm ready for what he has planned for me. I try to stay humble.

Unlike the other women in this study, Shelley has actually graduated once from CCC with a certificate in entrepreneurship. She decided to return to CCC because "when I got out there in the business world there was a lot of things I didn't know so it brought me back and I knew I needed a degree." Currently, Shelley is pursuing a degree in Entrepreneurship and Business Administration. Her goal is to transfer to a 4-year institution, earn a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, and open her own business.

Linda

Linda came to the United States in 1995 from South Korea. She is the oldest participant in the study at 38 years of age and is also the only participant who is currently married. Linda has two small children, ages eight and six, and prior to enrolling at CCC, she stayed at home with the children. Her children were a factor in Linda's decision to further her education as once they were in elementary school she had to help them with homework and communicate with their teachers.

Because English was not her first language, Linda began her educational experiences at CCC in the English as a Second Language classes (ESL):

I started it 5 years ago taking one class or two class. I started from the ESL class, English as a second language class. Then when I finished the ESL class . . . I got confidence in myself so I started more [classes].

Even though Linda and her husband own a successful business and financially she does not need to work outside of the home, she said,

To stay home I feel kinda like bored with myself. To get a job it's not a big deal but I have to go further, kinda, and then . . . not just working at the store you know, a higher job. I need some pride and stuff.

After being on the waiting list for a year, Linda was admitted into the CCC Nursing program. Linda did not see the process of being on a waiting list as an impediment to her educational goal. Instead, she saw it as an opportunity to build her English reading and writing skills. Linda described her thoughts on the waiting list process:

If you want to go for a nursing degree you have to have kind of 72 credits but half of the credits are liberal arts and science. You are on a waiting list for one year so you can become a nursing student and then they ask about your other classes, otherwise it is hard; nursing is really hard. But it is really good [being on the waiting list for one year] for all the students because liberal arts is really hard for me. It is not hard for the other students because they are good at speaking and writing but it is harder for me to reading and writing all the papers.

Linda will have completed her liberal arts classes at the end of the spring semester and will have begun her nursing classes in the fall on another CCC campus.

Jen

Jen is 26 years old, divorced, and the single mother of two young children, ages 8 months and 5 years. She grew up in a small town in the CCC service area. Like many adult students, Jen did not matriculate to college when she finished high

school. Instead, she decided to join the Army. When I asked about the factors that led to her enlistment, Jen said, “[I] joined the military shortly after my friends started to get into some trouble and I saw it coming. And I’m like, ‘I’m not going that route!’ So I joined the military.”

After serving 3 years of her 8-year military commitment, Jen discovered she was pregnant; the pregnancy led to her leaving active duty, moving to the Reserves, and moving back to the state where she grew up. She is currently finishing her 8-year commitment and hopes to be moved to inactive Reserves by the end of the year. Jen explained how she tried to find employment back in her home area:

The first thing I tried to do was find a job. I spent probably a good year looking for a job. I found with my military background they couldn’t call anybody for a reference check and I was like, “Well I still have my G.I. Bill money.” So I came back here with a goal [to go to college].

Even though her active duty had ended, her military experience was still influencing many aspects of Jen’s life—from how she was raising her children to staying disciplined and focused on her schoolwork. Jen described how she was using some of her military training when parenting her eldest, 5-year-old son,

I use the same principles [from military training] in my parenting ‘cause I don’t yell. I don’t believe in yelling ‘cause it never got through to an 18-year-old why is it gonna get through to some 4-year-old? I do use military commands, like [my son] knows when I say, ‘Front and center,’ he’s in trouble . . . but he learns respect.

The impact of her military training was woven throughout our conversations. For example, when I asked Jen if having children affected her ability to take classes, she said, “They don’t, I don’t allow it. I mean my children come first, but I’m lucky with my training and I’m mature enough to go to school and know how to balance it.” Jen made further reference to her military training and how it was helping her with the balancing of multiple responsibilities:

Yeah, you’re used to multitasking, used to being in charge of four other kids that just lost their mom. Military uses the expression “leaving the mom’s tit” when you join the military because your mommy ain’t around so it’s just interesting that I use the same principles in my parenting.

Jen is double majoring in Accounting for Information Systems and Accounting for Professionals and is scheduled to graduate next spring. Her goal is to transfer to a 4-year institution and earn a bachelor’s degree.

Summary of Participants

Although the women who participated in this study are all unique individuals they did share some common traits and challenges. For example, Annie, Melanie, Shelley, and Jen all grew up in the area around the CCC downtown campus. Also, even though all of the participants recognized that their education would benefit them in the working world, 4 of the 5 participants indicated they were attending CCC in order to “better my life”; only Jen strongly indicated that she was attending CCC in order to get a “better job.”

All of the participants spoke of the strong support they had received from family and friends regarding their decision to enroll and persist at CCC. The 2

younger participants, Annie and Jen, were the most directly influenced by parental support, or for Jen, lack thereof at one point. The remaining 3 participants relied mostly on their children and/or other adult, female students for the majority of their support.

Overall, all of the participants were very happy with their choice to pursue their education at CCC. Melanie simply said, “It’s been a great experience—my whole experience has been great.” Annie talked about how she hopes to find the same type of learning environment at the 4-year institution she plans to attend:

I’ve had some really great, great like, I mean I think to tell you the truth, I think that [CCC] isn’t given enough credit. I don’t think their teachers get enough credit. You know, everybody thinks, “[CCC] oh, community college,” Whatever! But they have some of the, if awesomest was a word I’m totally using it, some of the awesomest teachers ever! I’ve had a couple that were just great, great professors and I’m really happy about that, you know. I hope, I hope in my highest of hopes that when I do progress and I do go to [a 4-year institution] and everything that I find some really awesome professors there too.

Shelley said, “This was my start in my life and being here, and going here made me achieve things that I didn’t think I could.” She went on to explain how the CCC faculty had influenced her achievement: “Cause they see things in you that you don’t see in yourself and they take that extra time to show you and guide you and put interest in you.” Linda also expressed gratitude for the CCC instructors: “They are really understandable and it’s really nice.” And Jen said,

I like the whole community of people at [CCC], I mean I love the fact, I'm an accounting major—I don't know how it's like in other places—but I can talk to any of my instructors anytime I want to. And then a lot of the accounting students they know, you know, who we are accounting-wise and they'll be like, "Hey I don't understand this." And we're so diverse and see I love the age differences! I mean most colleges go from 18-25 but here I'm finding out it's the 30s are getting degrees and there's even some 40- and 50-year-olds!

Clearly each of the participants had found a level of comfort in the learning environment and with the faculty of the downtown campus of CCC.

Although the participants expressed a variety of ideas and challenges, the similarities in their educational experiences offered a wealth of data that imparted a glimpse into their experiences as adult, female students enrolled part-time at CCC. The next section will explore the main themes of this study with supporting evidence found in the data.

Themes and Analysis

A total of four themes emerged from the data collected during this study:

- the influence of family and friends,
- the balancing act,
- learning environments, and
- the role of aspirational capital.

Although these themes may seem quite broad, each will be refined, presented, and developed with reference to participant data followed by an application of the theoretical framework of the study to each theme.

Influence of Family and Friends

The levels of support expressed by the participants came primarily from friends—mainly adult, female, student friends—and from family members. Most of the examples given by participants were of positive support from others, but there were instances of negative opposition as well. Each of these types of support and opposition will be addressed individually.

All of the study participants spoke of the support they felt from their families with regard to their decisions to enroll and persist at CCC. However, this family support came primarily from two different groups of people: parents and children. As previously mentioned, the two youngest participants, Annie and Jen, mentioned receiving support from their parents. When I asked Jen if anyone supported her decision to go to school, she said, “It was my stepdad. He was like, ‘you know your best opportunity is to go back to school.’” Jen then described how her mom and stepdad were supporting her by helping her care for her two children, “My mom would watch my kids, you know, if I had to study or something . . . she stops by every day, ‘Do you want me to take the kids with me home?’ I’m lucky.” Jen could even rely on her parents’ help when she needed a break, “There’s a few times that I’ve called my mom to be like can you watch them? I need an adult moment!” Clearly her parents’ support has helped Jen with her role as parent and student.

Annie also mentioned the tremendous amount of positive support she has received from her parents. One segment of that support has come in the form of a financial agreement Annie has with her parents,

I'm 25 but I lucked out. This is the deal: I put the money up front and then I have to get good grades like such as A's and B's. No C's, no nothing like that!

And then they'll reimburse me.

But though Annie realized how fortunate she was to not have the financial worries of many adult students, the emotional support she has felt from her parents was even more important to her. Annie talked about the support she felt from her parents when she decided to enroll at CCC,

My parents have always wanted me to go back to school, always. You know, my dad has always pushed for it. My dad has always said, especially him, he's always said to me, "You know I've always seen potential, you have so much potential, and we just don't want to see you waste it."

Recently, when her dad was diagnosed with cancer, Annie realized how important this parental support is to her. The effect of her dad's diagnosis on her was apparent when Annie described the situation:

I mean [my family is] trying their best. Unfortunately, currently, there are some issues with my father, some medical issues with my dad, so I mean it's a little rough. They're kind of, well, we're all more preoccupied with that as well . . . as well as me, you know. . . . I stay so busy that it's kind of like I don't have the chance.

Annie also wrote about this in her journal: "There are some personal family issues that are going on, so my support system has been somewhat lacking lately.

Sometimes you can't always have that support system, so how do you deal with certain things then?" And in another journal entry:

I told [my English instructor at CCC] what's been going on with my family, my dad, and he completely understood. Unfortunately, he told me that his father passed last week of cancer. It just goes to show you that this disease can hit anyone, anytime, anywhere. It also shows that it takes a toll on families. Your priorities tend to change in crisis: mine definitely have.

Annie later admitted that her preoccupation with her dad's cancer had led to her skip classes, "Sometimes I just don't feel like going [to class]—I'd rather spend the time with my dad 'cause I'm not sure how long he's going to be here." Obviously the emotional support of her parents, particularly her father, has been critical to Annie's persistence.

Another type of support mentioned was that received from the participants' children. Shelley, Linda, and Jen all spoke of the importance of the support they have felt from their kids. Because their children are quite different in ages—Shelley's daughter is 16 years old, Linda's sons are 6 and 8 years old, and Jen's sons are 8 months and 5 years old—the types of support they have given are also different.

Shelley told me of how she never thought she would be a college student, "My mom never programmed us to be college students," and how she had to not only overcome that but other obstacles in her life: "We were homeless; I was homeless when [my daughter] was 2 years old. Who thought we would be in this place, you know?" She explained that her daughter understands the tough road that Shelley has traveled to get to be a student at CCC and how she felt when she graduated with her certificate: "The look on my daughter's face was so amazing. I just needed, I think I needed to be better for her." Shelley said that her daughter has

continued to give her support by saying, “Mom, you did it! You made it!’ She tells me all the time and I’m like, yeah, I did! I don’t know how, but I did!”

The support given by younger children may not have been as overt, but to Linda and Jen, it has been still very important. Jen spoke of how her eldest son, who is 5 years old, has shown his support for his mom’s schooling;

He’ll do homework with me. I mean he’s just practicing writing and we’ll sit at the table and he’ll be like, ‘I’m done. Are you done yet, Mommy?’ I’m like, no, I’ve got another class. He’s like, ‘Okay, I’ll practice coloring in the lines.’

This small gesture has helped Jen balance time with one of her sons while also getting the much needed time to do homework. Linda’s young children, ages 8 and 6, have supported their mom’s studies by helping her work on her English while she helps them with their school work. Linda said, “Because my kids are in school I have to help them with homework and other things. But English is my second language so I speak to my kids for practice.” Even though they are young, Linda said that her children understand how important it is to her to learn English well.

Although the support of family was very important, the supporting network of other adult, female friends was perhaps even more vital to the successful persistence of the study participants. The level of support given by these friends came in a variety of ways, whether by forming study groups or giving advice on social services in the community. Most of the participants mentioned that they have found other adult, female students in their classes with whom they can talk. Melanie said,

In a few of my classes we just formed a little study group. Like before class, come in an hour early and we'd all get together . . . it's like every study group that I've ever had or you know, every person I've befriended in class was always a female.

When I asked Shelley about the all female study groups to which she belonged, she said, "We're just a bunch of women with the same issues, the same troubles, trying to get on the same path and that connects us . . . and we're a support system for each other."

This support system of friends has gone deeper than merely being study groups for schoolwork. Often these adult women have shared life experiences and tips for surviving the world inside and outside of CCC. Melanie talked about how she feels when sharing experiences with her female network of friends:

It's neat to be able to go into a room like that and tell these people, "Oh my god, this is what I'm going through," and they're like, "Oh," the same thing. Just hearing that is kind of comforting. Knowing, okay, I'm not the only one, I'm not a dumb ass. You know sometimes I start to think that and then I start to internalize it and then I don't want to do anything and then I start feeling sorry for myself . . . I'm never going to get it. Just talking to other people and knowing they share the same fears and problems, it helps me. Okay, I'm not unique, you know. They're going through it and you know I can make it, too.

Because many of the participants and their friends share common life situations, like single parenthood, they also share resources that they have used or

heard about. Jen spoke of her frustration with the CCC system and how her adult, female network helped her:

When I first came [to CCC], I didn't know anything about the support services. I didn't know anything about [a state-sponsored job program] and I had to find out by just talking to other people. [CCC] give[s] you the Pell grant, "Here's your student loans, here's your work study, you can try to pay this." But they don't tell you anything about if your car breaks down or for some reason you're short on rent. "We'll give you some money. Don't worry about paying us back because that's what we're here for." I didn't know that. It took me talking to people to figure out, hey, I could get that help.

Fortunately Jen had a network of adult, women friends who could help her navigate the support systems and find the help she needed.

Unfortunately not all the responses from family and friends were always positive. In fact, the reactions were occasionally destructive. For example, Jen told of how her parents' divorce impacted her college plans:

My parents got divorced when I was in high school and my dad ran off with my college fund. So I brought up the whole, "I'm joining the Army because of this," and he's like, "You'll never make it." I'm like, "Now you just made me want to sign the papers. Thanks, I needed that little push."

Annie revealed that part of the reason she had stopped out of college was due to the negative input from her boyfriend at the time. She said,

My boyfriend at the time was kind of like, "You know what, you don't really need to go to school. A job is a job is a job." And I really didn't have

somebody around me who was supporting me very much on wanting to better myself.

Both of these examples prove that words can be quite powerful when it comes to extinguishing one's desire to make a better life.

But although words may damage the spirit they do not harm a person in the same way that physical abuse can. Shelley knows this fact all too well and has a scar to prove it. She divulged that she had been the victim of abuse in a past relationship: "I really thought I was gonna die. I had to get out of that relationship. It was horrible." Happily, Shelley is no longer in that relationship and actually thinks of that experience, along with other past hardships, as a means to gain strength. This idea will be developed further in the section examining the aspirational capital theme.

These cases of negative response from family and significant others are consistent with the other illustrations of negative family attitudes and lack of support—emotionally, financially and physically—from significant others that adult women entering or re-entering postsecondary education may face (Mikolal & Boggs, 1991). However, the majority of examples of support that the participants of this study experienced was of a positive and reinforcing nature and served to bolster their confidence and fortify their resolve to persist at CCC. Yet there certainly were challenges to persistence that these adult women face. Primary among these challenges was that of maintaining a sense of steadiness among all of the multiple roles and responsibilities that they face. In essence, each woman had to perform a

balancing act. The next section examines this theme of the balancing act as experienced by the participants.

The Balancing Act

The participants for this study were very forthcoming when our conversations turned to the topic of challenges they face in regard to their lives as adult, female students. Although the exact challenges varied from participant to participant, their responses are grouped into two categories: juggling multiple roles and responsibilities and managing emotional challenges. The following is a discussion of each of these categories.

The challenge of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities is not a new concept to anyone who works with adult students. Adult students generally think of themselves as adults first and students second, as they tend to spend the majority of their time engaged in activities outside their role as student. For the participants in this study these activities included managing family life and full- or part-time employment. Two of the participants, Annie and Melanie, expressed how it felt for them to be juggling school, employment, and a social life. When I asked Annie to describe her greatest challenge in being an adult female student, she said, “I’d say just trying to balance work and school and life. My boyfriend, and my friends, and my family—it’s just such a balancing act.” She went on to explain the toll this juggling act has taken on her: “I’m tired. Tired. I work and I’m so busy and then I have school. You try and concentrate but you’re so exhausted and tired . . . it’s just very exhausting and time consuming.” Like Annie, Melanie expressed how she felt as she coped with the juggling of multiple responsibilities:

I'm stressed about that trying to, you know, manage two classes and make sure I get everything done in this class. I'm overwhelmed with too much to do in this one and not this one and so trying to balance it out. . . . Sometimes I stress about whether or not I'm going to be able to manage my social life, getting work done, and school.

Both Annie and Melanie had the added responsibility of being employed while attending school—Annie was working two part-time jobs, and Melanie was employed full time—but neither had to cope with the myriad of challenges the role of parenthood places on an adult, female student.

Linda has two young children and explained why coping with being a parent while being a student is her greatest challenge: "I have homework and I don't have time and my kids are bugging me. . . . I try to do homework at school or, you know, early in the morning but I'm tired. It's hard." In addition to finding time to study, Linda was feeling the added pressure of the "second shift" (Hothschild, 1989): "I don't have enough time to do other things, you know, housework and other things. Sometimes I have all that homework and tests . . . so the house might be dirty and that kind of thing." Not only was housework a concern for Linda but she also had to schedule time to run errands, pick up the children from school, and buy groceries. Linda described this managing of her daily schedule as, "You know, I have to run." This juggling of daily tasks and responsibilities can certainly be daunting, especially for adult, female students, as they are the ones who, according to society, are most responsible for nurturing and caring for the family and its needs (Hartsock, 1998).

This burden of added responsibility can take its toll on adult, female students both physically and emotionally.

Managing emotional challenges was something that several of the participants mentioned. Many of the feelings expressed by the participants dealt with the fact that they were older students who had been away from the classroom for a few years. This sentiment was expressed by the youngest participant, Annie, who said: "I was so afraid of being in school for so many years being older," as well as one of the oldest students in the study, Shelley, who said, "It's harder for you to remember what you learned in high school and elementary!" But the participant who most articulated the challenge of managing emotional challenges was Melanie.

When I asked Melanie to describe how she felt when she first went back to class, she said,

I was nervous. I just had all these emotions. I was nervous, overwhelmed, scared . . . because I was older and I figured that everybody coming to class was going to be 18 or 19, fresh out of high school, and I was going to be the oldest one. What will they think? Are they going to look down upon me and say, "Well, it's kinda late now to get started?"

Even though Melanie had been taking classes at CCC for several semesters, she still was having some feelings of insecurity and uneasiness at the beginning of each class. She explained how she approaches a new classroom:

I'm always looking around trying to see if there's somebody my age or if everybody's younger or just kinda get a feel for the class. But it's always

nervous going into that first class, you know. Who are you gonna see? You know, am I gonna be the oldest one?

As our conversations continued, Melanie shared that her nervousness about being an older student did not have much to do with her fear of her lack of skills as much as it did with her feeling societal pressures that as an adult she should have finished her education at an earlier age. Melanie described the affect this societal pressure has on her:

I think the hardest part is that [my education] taking so long, you know. I am older, you know, I should have had this a long time ago. I have to accept the fact that it could be 3 or 4 years before I have a degree and actually be able to use it. That's been the hardest thing.

Not only was Melanie feeling the pressure that she should be further along the path to degree completion but she also was experiencing feelings of inferiority if she didn't know the answer to something she thought society believed she, as an adult, should know. Melanie illustrated this experience when she described how she felt when she was struggling in a basic math class:

Being somebody who is older, you know, [younger students] expect you to know these things and you should have gone to school. You should have this education. You should know these things. So if you don't, you're looked at like you're an idiot.

Although Melanie had obviously been affected by these experiences she was not allowing these societal pressures and negative feelings to stop her from continuing to pursue her degree.

The challenges associated with the balancing act described by these women illustrate the multiple impediments adult students may encounter as they return to higher education. Schlossberg et al. (1989) reminded educators that these challenges to persistence will not only continue but they may also become more diverse as greater numbers of heterogeneous adult students find themselves looping in and out of postsecondary institutions until their needs are satisfied. This act of looping in and out of postsecondary education may take a student to multiple campuses, especially when attending a multi-campus institution like CCC. Each campus may have a different learning environment in which an adult student may either feel comfortable or out of place. This sense of comfort may influence how a student perceives his or her learning environment as either positive or negative. The participants in this study shared both positive and negative campus experiences and their perceptions of each. The next section examines these experiences and how they either supported or challenged participants' persistence at CCC.

Learning Environments

CCC, the institution utilized in this study, is a multi-campus institution; it has six separate campuses spread throughout its service area along with three other locations that serve as career institutes and success centers. The site for this study was the downtown campus of CCC. Although not the largest of the CCC campuses, the downtown campus has the reputation of being the location best suited for adult students. Shelley summed up this idea: “[At the downtown campus] you can be whoever you want to be.” In contrast, when talking about the possibility of taking classes at other CCC campuses, Melanie said, “I’m sure it will be a little nerve

racking, new people, and I hear the [suburban] campus is basically where you see all the young kids, but I'll be fine with it." The participants in this study spoke of what it feels like to be an adult, female student at the downtown campus as well as other CCC campuses they may have attended. Both the positive and negative experiences will be explored in the following section.

Negative Campus Experiences. The common thread woven throughout each participant's report of negative campus experiences was the lack of diversity on other CCC campuses. When participants spoke of a lack of diversity they included race, age and cultural differences.

The first negative experience that was told to me regarded race. Shelley recalled a time when she was enrolled in a specific program that resulted in her having to take classes at another CCC campus, the suburban campus. She explained her negative experience:

I went out to the [suburban] campus. It's a little different from this [downtown] campus. I was taking my commercial landscaping classes and there are not a lot of Blacks that take those classes, and women as well. . . . I really stood out. It was a bad experience. . . . I tried it, but it was not for me.

Shelley not only felt like an outsider but disclosed that she had even experienced being made fun of by other students at the suburban campus. She described how that experience affected her: "I know what it's like for people to tease you in the classroom, you know, even as a college student. [It happened] at the [suburban] campus . . . it really broke my heart." As a result of these negative experiences, after only one semester at the suburban campus Shelley dropped out of the commercial

landscaping program and enrolled in a program that had classes exclusively at the downtown campus.

Other stories of negative experiences on campuses revolved around these students' ages. As many adult students can attest, it is not uncommon for them to feel insecure about being the oldest student in the classroom; the study participants were no different. Shelley told me how she felt when taking a class at the suburban campus: "I was the only person in the class over probably 20, yeah, I think I was, and I mean, we're not old! I think I was 32 at the time. . . . It was horrible." Even Jen, one of the youngest study participants at 26 years of age, told of how she did not like taking classes at the suburban campus due primarily to the lack of adult students. Jen summed up how she interacts with other students:

I don't talk to 16-, 19-year-olds. We don't really have anything in common. I talk to the older, like, my friends that have been around a while. I mean, they've been here longer and they know what things are there to help you and what they're doing. . . . A lot of us here at [the downtown] campus have been out there and we're back and we know what we need to get. We're driven. Then you throw a bunch of people that aren't driven [younger students]—it kind of disturbs the rhythm of it.

Like Shelley, Jen came to the conclusion that the downtown campus would be better suited for her as an adult, female student.

In addition to perceiving that one's age is uncommon at a given campus, Linda also felt that her background as an international student contributed to her decision to enroll at the downtown campus. Linda had enrolled at the south CCC

campus, which was closer to her home. But after only one semester, she began attending classes at the downtown campus. Like Shelley's feeling of being only one of a few Black students at the suburban campus, Linda felt singled out as an international student at the south campus. Linda summed up the situation at the south campus simply: "[South] campus doesn't have any international students." Linda went on to tell me that her role as an international student had more of an impact on her experiences at CCC than the roles of being an adult or being a female. Consequently, like Shelley and Jen, Linda decided to attend classes at the downtown campus as it has more diversity and consequently is "kind of unique and more friendly" for her. It is at the downtown campus where the participants encountered their positive experiences at CCC. The positive experiences recounted by the participants are outlined in the following section.

Positive Campus Experiences. Despite the negative experiences encountered by study participants on other CCC campuses, the stories told about experiences at the downtown campus were all positive. Examples of positive aspects of the downtown campus were supportive teachers and the diverse student body.

Annie talked about the stereotype that instructors at a community college may not be as good as at other institutions: I think that [CCC] isn't given enough credit. I don't think their teachers get enough credit. You know everybody thinks, "[CCC], oh, community college," whatever!" But then she went on to refute that stereotype, stating: "But [CCC downtown has] some of the, if awesomest was a word—I'm totally using it—awesomest teachers ever!" Annie went on to say that she was hoping to find the same caliber of professors when she transfers to a 4-year institution. Shelley

also spoke of the great teachers she has had at the downtown campus and how they have helped her persist: “[CCC downtown campus instructors] see things in you that you don’t see in yourself and they take the extra time to show you and guide you and put interest in you.” Linda spoke of how her instructors react when she has to leave class due to a sick child, “I talk to the instructor and not a problem. They are really understandable and it’s really nice.” Clearly the faculty at the downtown campus seems to be contributing to the persistence of these adult, female students.

In addition to supportive faculty, the other overarching factor in the positive experiences for the participants was the presence of other adult students at the downtown campus. Melanie recalled how nervous she was about being the oldest person in her classes and being looked down on by the other, younger students. Fortunately, that was not the case at the downtown campus. Melanie explained,

You know, I didn’t find any of that to be true. I was very fortunate in the classes I was in because there were people my age, people with the same background that I had. . . . I think that’s what kind of, you know, calmed me down a little and, “Oh, this isn’t going to be such a bad experience,” because there were people like me in those classes.

Jen also spoke of how she has enjoyed the presence of other adult students at the downtown campus and enthusiastically conveyed her feelings about the student body at the downtown campus:

I like the whole community of people at [CCC]. . . . We’re so diverse! I love the age differences. I mean most colleges go from 18-25 [years old], but here

I'm finding out it's the 30's and there's even some 40- and 50-year-olds, and it's like, "Wow! You did all this and you're back here? Wow!"

So not only is it a comfort for adult students to be in classes with their peers but adult students can also serve as role models, and even mentors, to younger, adult students like Jen. However, even with positive experiences on campus and in the classroom, there was still a more powerful factor influencing the decision to persist for the study's participants—their sense of aspirational capital. This theme of aspirational capital will be discussed in the next section.

Aspirational Capital

As outlined in chapter 2, aspirational capital is an idea associated with critical race theory and is derived from Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. The idea of utilizing resiliency theory was explored but abandoned due to the negative connotation associated with the concept. In particular it is the idea that one must have some form of recovery from a devastating event in order to be deemed resilient. Thus, aspirational capital and its lack of negative stigma was used for this study. Aspirational capital is "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). This aspirational capital seemed to be the foundation upon which these women built their determination to persist at CCC, and thus, it is the cornerstone of this study's results.

Although none of the participants named their determination as aspirational capital, each spoke of its influence on her persistence at CCC in similar ways. Jen simply stated that her persistence was due to the fact that "I'm more driven to succeed." Linda talked about how even though her competing roles and

responsibilities has been challenging, she has persisted because she wants to increase her own sense of pride in herself. She said, "It's hard to study but I just, I have to do it, you know, otherwise, no one is teaching me. I have to do it myself."

This idea of independent perseverance was echoed throughout my conversations with Annie. Annie repeatedly spoke of her recognition that her success or failure at CCC was up to her. Annie described this sense of aspirational capital:

I'm determined to do it. I just need to get through it, you know? I made the decision myself, nobody else did. . . . I still keep wanting to, you know, take a step up, and step up, and step up, and just be better. And it's for myself; it's not for anybody else, it's for me. I want to feel better about me and I want to do what I know I can do.

Annie's sense of aspirational capital became very apparent when she spoke of how she has gotten through the tough times;

I know that it's worth it and I know that it will definitely pay off in the end. So, you know, I guess you always have to help yourself because sometimes you're just like I want to throw my hands up and give up! I'm just so tired that I can't even stand this anymore but you have to think about it and just be like, I wanna, you know, "C'mon, man, you can do it! You can get through this!" I just know that it's gonna be worth it for me, I really do. . . . Sometimes without sacrifice there's no gain.

When I mentioned that I thought she was very resilient, Annie just said, "I just do what I have to do." Clearly, even though she may not specifically name it,

aspirational capital has had a significant presence in Annie's decision to persist at CCC.

In Melanie's experiences, aspirational capital has helped her persist even through the times when she has wanted to quit school. It is during those times that Melanie has reflected on the lifestyle she had prior to starting her education and how that led her down a path she no longer wants to travel. Melanie described how she does not give herself a chance to fail in her schooling:

I'm scared of failing. . . . If I get too far behind I know how easy it would be for me to say, "Just drop it! Take the easy way out. Why worry about it?" So I constantly feel like I need to pressure myself to make sure I do it. . . .

Sometimes I have to sit there and look at it long term, you know, it's gonna pay off in the end. Sometimes it's frustrating but that's what keeps me going, too. I know that I'm going to learn and grow from, you know, the experiences in school and I just have to stick with it.

Melanie knows that going back to her former lifestyle is not an option. Fortunately she has enough aspirational capital to keep her moving toward her educational goal.

Aspirational capital has been an important component in Shelley's educational experiences as well as other areas of her life. Part of Shelley's aspirational capital is drawn from her spirituality,

When you fall down you just gotta get back up. I try to reflect myself like Jesus—he kept falling down and he just got back up. You gotta do that. If you stay down, you stay down. Get up!

Shelley also spoke of how the difficult times in her life have helped her gain strength and resiliency:

We find strength within ourselves. We're women of knowledge and wisdom. Hardships bring very strong wisdom . . . my life hardships really made me strong. . . . I want to take my hardships and make something positive—let my light shine.

And Shelley realized that continuing her education at CCC was the way for her to move toward her dreams. She spoke of how she never imagined she would be taking classes and moving closer and closer to her educational goals:

This was my start in my life. Being here and going here made me achieve things that I didn't think I could. . . . Everyday you wake up you have something to look forward to; you're changing your life. Everyday you wake up you're doing something about your life and that's a big achievement in my life because I didn't expect to be where I am now, but now I'm striving . . . you just keep going. Eventually, once you keep going you'll find the light within your journey.

Thanks in large part to aspirational capital, Shelley and the other study participants have continued to persist at CCC and nurture their educational goals and dreams.

These four themes have provided an in-depth look at the thoughts and educational experiences of adult female students who are enrolled part time at a Midwestern community college. The next section provides a summary describing how these themes answer the research questions that guided this study.

Summary with Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. This study sought to expand the research on student retention by describing the perspectives of adult female students who are enrolled part time at a community college in the Midwest. The research questions guiding this study are presented below along with applicable thematic findings.

1. What are the educational experiences of adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program at a community college in the Midwest?

Overall, the women in this study were quite satisfied with their educational experiences at the downtown campus of CCC. However, several participants mentioned various difficulties in persisting with their education. Some participants described the challenge of juggling work responsibilities and finding time to do homework and attend classes. Others expressed the difficulties of balancing the role of student with the responsibilities of parenthood and family life. This challenge of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities is consistent with literature that details how adult students often think of themselves as adults, with responsibilities outside the classroom, first and students second (Lynch & Chickering, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1989).

Given that this group of women did regard themselves as adults with out-of-classroom obligations first and students second, they did not get actively engaged in

campus organizations or nonacademic activities. It was not that the participants did not necessarily want to participate but more that they did not have time to do so due to their off-campus responsibilities, namely employment or childcare. However, this lack of engagement did not seem to negatively impact the academic success of the participants or their desire to persist at CCC, which is contrary to research connecting student engagement and persistence (Astin, 1984).

Due in large part to out-of-classroom responsibilities, some of the participants also experienced a gap in their postsecondary educational experiences. Both Annie and Shelley had started their postsecondary enrollment but had interrupted it for personal reasons—Annie because she had decided she needed to take time and figure out her educational goals before proceeding academically, Shelley and Jen because of family needs. This inconsistent enrollment is a type of “looping,” an in-and-out cycle of postsecondary enrollment that adult students may experience (Schlossberg et al., 1989). And though all of the participants were currently enrolled, and had been so for at least two concurrent semesters, outside responsibilities and stressors may arise that could jeopardize any of the participant’s enrollment at any time.

Along with being adults with responsibilities outside of academics, and the stresses that accompany those responsibilities, several participants described managing the emotional challenges associated with feeling they were too old to be enrolled in the community college. These descriptions ranged from the feeling of literally being the oldest person in the classroom to perceiving that other, younger students were more comfortable with and knowledgeable about subject matter.

These feelings of uncertainty with the transition from “citizen-in-the-world” to student are consistent with the literature regarding adult transition to postsecondary education, which posits that adults often face a greater transition when returning to postsecondary education than their younger counterparts (Steltonpohl & Shipton, 1986). Although several participants told about their experiences with these emotional challenges, they also indicated that the presence of these challenges had not stopped them from persisting. Several participants credited the downtown campus’s diversity and caring faculty for assisting in their persistence by creating a positive learning environment. However, participants did not always experience a supportive learning environment.

Participants described both positive and negative campus experiences. However, all examples of negative campus experiences took place on other CCC campuses, not the downtown campus. One reason for this is that the illustrations of negative campus experiences dealt with a lack of diversity in the student body at other CCC campuses; the downtown campus of CCC is known for its diverse community of students, both in ages and ethnicities. Added to this were participants’ descriptions of faculty at the downtown campus as not only excellent instructors but also caring and understanding of the participants’ responsibilities outside of the classroom. This combination of compassionate instructors and an environment filled with their peers greatly enhanced the educational experiences of the participants.

2. What are the factors contributing to the decisions to persist for adult, female, part-time students at the Midwestern community college?

Even though the balancing act and support from family and friends were factors in their decisions to persist, it was the participants' aspirational capital, "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77), that was the most dynamic element in their decisions to persist. In spite of the myriad of obstacles and setbacks encountered, each participant was able to draw upon her aspirational capital and keep going. Whether it was the sense of making her life better, the feeling of pride and accomplishment experienced when succeeding in coursework, or just sheer determination, each of the study participants was resolute in her pursuit of her educational dreams. In general, it was this attribute of aspirational capital that was the most influential factor in the participants' decisions to persist at CCC.

Along with their aspirational capital each participant described how the support from family and friends contributed to her decision to persist at CCC. This support was more influential in the participants' decisions to persist than other outside factors, such as hours of employment (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The forms of familial support ranged from Jen's 5-year-old son sitting with her at the table and doing homework to Annie's parents agreeing to reimburse her for tuition. The support from female, adult friends was also a significant factor in the participants' decisions to persist as it included things like forming study groups, referring one another to community resources, or just being present to remind one another that no one was alone on her journey at CCC. Regardless of the source of the support, the influence of family and friends, especially their show of support, was very influential in the participants' decisions to persist. These relationships with others, both positive

and negative, also helped the participants shift the way they understand and make meaning of their worlds, their way of knowing.

Many of the participants had experienced failed relationships with others—Jen with her father and ex-husband, Shelley and Melanie with their families, Annie with her boyfriend—that had compelled them to turn inward and to listen to their “gut” to understand their world and to figure out what was right for their lives. As presented in chapter 2, researchers have named five categories for women’s ways of knowing: silence, received, subjective, procedural, and constructed. These five categories provide a construct through which the ways that women know and understand their world can be better understood and examined. The findings of this study outline how the participants had made the journey from received to subjective knowers.

Women who subscribe to subjective knowledge are still dualistic, believing there is still only one correct answer, but now think that truth lies within a person. These women rely on their intuition to supply the right answer. This intuitive recognition was mentioned by each of the participants. Melanie expressed this sense of relying on her intuition: “I know that I’m going to learn and grow from, you know, the experiences in school and I just have to stick with it.” Annie said, “I know in my heart of hearts that I am meant for something bigger so that’s what I’m pursuing.” Like Melanie and Annie, the other participants just had a sense that they were going to be successful; they could just feel it.

Subjective knowers see truth as something that is experienced, not constructed; they see themselves as conduits for truth, not constructors of truth. As

Shelley said, "We're women of knowledge and wisdom." Unlike silence and received knowers, subjective knowers see truth only for the individual and not as an absolute for everyone. The participants in the study demonstrated this idea through statements such as when Annie talked about the concept of success: "I just want to better my life, I mean I want to be successful and maybe in my eyes other people think of success in different ways than what success means to me," or when Melanie spoke of how she tries to help other adult women students: "I'm just letting them know what works for me and, you know, I hope it works for you, too." Through statements like these and expressions of a reliance on intuition, the participants of this study revealed how they had moved through received to subjective knowing.

The transition from received to subjective knowing was a contributing factor to these women's decisions to persist as, by turning inward for guidance and truth, each woman was able to build her aspirational capital. The potency of each woman's aspirational capital may not have been as intense had she been a received or silent knower. But by recognizing herself as a potential source of strength and knowledge each participant was able to develop and utilize the aspirational capital that helped her navigate through the many challenges that may threaten her persistence at CCC.

The juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities was another factor in the participants' decisions to persist. The women described the challenge of finding time to study, work, and have time for family or significant people in their lives. Along with this balancing of roles and responsibilities the participants described the challenge of facing their nervousness and uncertainties of being in the classroom with younger

students, questioning their decision to enroll, and occasionally, dealing with thoughts of dropping out. However, even though coping with numerous responsibilities and overcoming their own doubts and insecurities was something that each of the participants had to face, the strength and availability of their support networks seemed to assist the participants in successfully plotting a course through these obstacles and, thus, persisting.

All four of these themes were consistent throughout my conversations with each of the 5 participants. This consistency and repetition of themes by participants led to saturation as no new themes or information emerged from the data.

Discussion of Feminist Standpoint

Feminist standpoint was a critical component of this study as phenomenology explores descriptions of the experiences of participants, and in this study that meant the everyday experiences of the participants, adult, female students, was given center stage. Feminist standpoint is not meant to essentialize the experiences of women into a universal experience, but rather to use their experience as women as a center point from which to explore other experiences. In other words, the intent of feminist standpoint is not to uncover a single truth or reality but, instead, to provide space for another story. In this study that story was the educational experiences of adult women at a community college.

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of positive support systems and campus experiences on the participants' decisions to persist. However, more importantly the findings exemplify the importance of each woman's inner drive and desire to persist despite obstacles—her aspirational capital. Feminist standpoint was

a critical conduit through which to tell each participant's story of her aspirational capital, presented as a way to give public voice to underrepresented groups and to value their experiences (Harding, 2004). These findings demonstrate how each participant overcame hurdles in her life and in the process found her own voice and a sense of self. Participants also made their voices public through the use of personal journals in which they documented thoughts and feelings experienced during the data collection segment of the study. The analysis of these journals and their subsequent contribution to this study are discussed in the following section.

Document Analysis

Each of the 5 participants was given a journal in which to write about experiences and thoughts between our scheduled interviews. Unfortunately the journals were not as useful as I had planned. Three of the participants, Annie, Shelley and Melanie, wrote at least a little in their journals whereas Jen and Linda did not. All who utilized the journals shared their writings with me; Shelley and Annie wrote in the most detail and with more description than Melanie. Shelley expressed her thoughts in poems and Annie and Melanie did so through more of a first-person, storytelling approach. I discussed using their journal entries in the dissertation and all three participants were excited about that, especially Shelley who indicated she was looking for an outlet for her poetry. However, despite repeated attempts including e-mail, phone, and another face-to-face chance meeting, I was unable to obtain Shelley's journal or any of her poems. Thus the document analysis was limited to Melanie and Annie's journals and did not contribute as much material to this study as had been originally intended. Yet, the material that was available did

add to this study through the supporting of the themes that emerged from the data. Thus, the journals were not only useful as an outlet for thoughts and feelings for those participants who utilized them but also served as a means of credibility for the study's findings.

Summary

This chapter examined the findings of this study through the review of major themes along with applicable participant data. The four themes were: influence of family and friends, challenges to persistence, campus experiences, and aspirational capital. The two research questions that guided this study were also revisited and discussed according to relevant themes and participant data. Finally, a discussion of the findings within the context of feminist standpoint and *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1997) was presented. Chapter 5 includes conclusions and limitations of the study, recommendations for community colleges regarding retention practices directed toward adult, female, part-time students, as well as implications for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe, interpret, and analyze the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. The guiding theoretical framework for this study was feminist standpoint. In addition, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1997) provided a context through which to examine the different perspectives women utilize to make meaning and understand their world. Through the use of semi-structured individual interviews and analysis of participants' journals, data were gathered regarding the educational experiences of five women currently attending CCC. The data revealed the ways that the women made meaning of their educational experiences as well as the factors that contributed to their decisions to persist at CCC. Thematic findings of the study were expounded upon in chapter 4.

This chapter outlines conclusions, limitations, and recommendations based on the findings of this study. Contributions of this study to the literature on adult female persistence at community colleges will also be discussed along with implications for future research and practice.

Conclusions

Conclusions can be drawn regarding the educational experiences of the participants as well as the factors contributing to their decisions to persist at CCC.

Each of these conclusions and their subsequent congruence or incongruence with current literature will be addressed individually in the following section.

Educational Experiences

Overall the participants expressed satisfaction with the educational experiences they had gone through at the downtown campus of CCC. It is significant to note that these positive experiences occurred specifically at the downtown campus and not at other CCC campuses. Examples of less than positive experiences endured at other CCC campuses ranged from Linda perceiving she was the only international student at the south campus of CCC to Shelley feeling as though she stuck out as not only the single female but also the only Black student in a program offered at the suburban campus of CCC. Yet, even though they encountered rather negative occurrences at other CCC campuses, each of the participants found a comfortable and welcoming place at the downtown campus. Shelley summed up this sentiment: “You can be whoever you want to be [at the downtown campus].”

All of the participants suggested the primary reason for their engagement in postsecondary education was to “better” their lives. This is congruent with research that has stated that educational attainment positively impacts one’s satisfaction with life and happiness (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Examples given for bettering one’s life included the desire to be a good role model for their children for Linda, Jen and Shelley; not falling back into previous life patterns for Melanie; to fulfilling her dream of working in the medical field for Annie. Only Jen, the youngest participant, indicated that a strong secondary purpose for seeking a college degree was to

secure a better paying job. Yet she, too, revealed that setting a good example for her sons played a major role in her pursuit of postsecondary education: "I'm going to school [as] I'd like to show my kids you can do anything you want to do." This statement by Jen is a good example of how an individual's attendance at a postsecondary institution influences the nature of her children's lives (Pascarella & Terenzini).

Along with the positive and negative campus happenings, the educational experiences of the participants also included numerous challenges to their persistence. These challenges, which have been labeled as the balancing act, included the juggling of multiple roles and managing emotional challenges. For the participants, the juggling of multiple roles included finding an equilibrium between employee and student for Annie and Melanie and facing the second shift (Hothschild, 1989) when arriving home for Linda. Linda was the only participant who mentioned the presence of the second shift; however, this may also be directly related to the fact that she was the only participant in the study who was currently married. Current literature (Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991) has stated that the simultaneous juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities may lead to role overload for adult women. In turn, this role overload may lead to interpersonal and emotional challenges.

As for emotional challenges, the participants did not express overwhelming doubts regarding their abilities in the classrooms. In general, they expressed their nervousness about being an older, or perhaps the oldest, student in the classroom. Much of this uneasiness about being older seemed to stem from societal pressures

perceived by the participants that they should have completed their college degrees earlier in their lives. Melanie, in particular, articulated this concept: "I should have had this [college degree] a long time ago." This function of coping with internal issues of competence, emotions, and identity (Lynch & Chickering, 1984) is congruent with literature regarding the challenges facing adult students as they enter or re-enter postsecondary education. In spite of wrestling with this internal strife, each of the women had made the decision to work through her anxieties and to persist at CCC. Other factors contributing to the participants' decisions to persist are discussed in the following section.

Factors Contributing to Decisions to Persist

There were two main factors that contributed to the participants' decisions to persist at CCC: the strong support of their family and friends and their own sense of aspirational capital. When woven together these two factors provided a strong base upon which the participants could stand when they felt uneasy or unsure of their pursuit of postsecondary education at CCC.

The first factor, the strong support of family and friends, was present for each of the participants in one form or another. For example, for Jen it was the support of her mother who would watch her children while Jen studied plus the childlike support of her 5-year-old son when he would do his coloring with Jen at the kitchen table. Like Jen, Linda felt the support of her two young sons who encouraged her learning of English. For Melanie it was the support of a group of adult women, who had experienced many of the same things as she and with whom Melanie could talk and receive understanding and encouragement. Shelley, too, had a group of adult

women with whom she could talk and receive affirmation of her decision to persist, assistance with class scheduling or other resources, as well as friendship. And Annie recognized her good fortune of having not only emotional but also financial support from her parents as well as a supportive relationship with a boyfriend who reinforced her decision to persist at CCC. Clearly the support of parents, children, and friends was a very significant factor in the participants' decisions to persist. This is consistent with research that has shown that the presence of a strong support network, financially and emotionally, is critical for adult women entering, or reentering, postsecondary education (Mikolaj & Boggs, 1991).

Yet the principal factor in the participants' decisions to persist was their sense of aspirational capital. Though their support networks were in place and playing an essential role in their lives the participants still encountered challenges to their persistence, both internally and externally, that without aspirational capital could have easily ended their enrollment at CCC. For example, even with the knowledge that they had the backing of their adult women friends, it was their sense of aspirational capital that helped Shelley and Linda persist when they felt alone and singled out at other CCC campuses. It was aspirational capital that helped Melanie overcome her nervousness and uneasiness about being an older student, as she knew she wanted to create a better life for herself and not return to past experiences and lifestyles. Annie and Jen drew on their aspirational capital when significant people in their lives discouraged and sabotaged their pursuit of postsecondary education emotionally and financially, as they decided they were going to persist for themselves and their futures. In spite of facing obstacles and barriers to their

persistence, each of the participants has not only maintained her hopes and dreams for the future but through her enrollment and persistence at CCC, she has been taking steps to fulfill those hopes and dreams.

Consequently, the findings of this study show that the factors that led to the students' decisions to persist were not based on their commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1982) or a devotion to their academic experience (Astin, 1984). And although the participants' decisions to persist were influenced by variables such as employment, family, and the support of others (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the foremost factor influencing their decisions to persist was each woman's sense of aspirational capital. This addition of aspirational capital to the research on student persistence plus other contributions to the literature is discussed in the following section.

Contributions to the Literature

This study explored the educational experiences of a particular group of students that is underrepresented in the literature. Previous studies have focused on the experiences of adult students as a whole, which are different from adult, female students. The findings of this study will add to the literature regarding adult female students enrolled at public community colleges in the United States through the incorporation of the concept of aspirational capital. Future research and consequent resulting literature utilizing this concept will expand the comprehension and recognition of the educational experiences of adult women at public community colleges as well as the factors influencing their decisions to persist.

This study will also assist public community colleges in the quest to gain an innate understanding of the educational experiences and factors contributing to the

decisions to persist for adult, female, part-time students on their campuses. In turn, this understanding will assist them in policy development and retention practices for this population of students.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that the research site consisted of one campus of a public community college in the Midwest. However, the single research site enabled me to draw conclusions regarding the campus experiences expressed by the participants as they shared a common campus location. An additional limitation was the number of study participants. Although I had originally intended to have a sample of 7 to 10 individuals, I ended up securing a sample of 5 participants. This is not surprising since the very essence of being an adult, female student revolves around the fact that one has multiple roles and responsibilities and little time for extra activities, like participating in a research study. However, the small number of participants made it possible for me to spend the time with each that was necessary to gain each participant's understanding of the phenomenon under study. Another limitation is that 1 of the 5 participants was unavailable for the third, and final, interview of the three interview series which resulted in a total of 14 instead of 15 total interviews. Again, I was fortunate to have been given so much time out of the participants' busy lives such that I was able to record 14 interviews. The resulting four themes were consistently repeated throughout all the interviews and, thus, saturation was reached. Had the four themes not been present across all participants then more participants would have been recruited for the study until saturation was realized.

A final limitation was that this study focused on one campus of one institution and had only 5 participants from that institution. In order for this study to more broadly address the adult, female student population at community colleges it would need to be expanded to include more institutions and involve more participants. However, the design of this study provides insight into the educational experiences and factors influencing decisions to persist for this understudied population. The use of Seidman's (2006) three interview series also assisted me in better understanding who the participants were and how they made meaning of their experiences at CCC.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study suggest that student affairs professionals, community college faculty, and campus administrators need to be more intentional in taking steps to address the needs of adult women who attend community colleges like CCC. For example, an issue that arose from this study was the inadequate processes for communicating services available to assist adult female students on the CCC downtown campus. Administrators and student affairs staff at the downtown campus, and other CCC campuses, could evaluate the current methods for delivering information to this population of students regarding services, programming, or other resources in an effort to improve communication. As part of this evaluation, adult female students could be surveyed regarding the ways they receive information as well as what type of services and resources they currently use or may need to use. A committee of CCC downtown staff; adult, female student representatives; and community resource representatives could be convened to address the delivery of information, services, and referrals for the students at CCC.

Not only would this bring all stakeholders into the conversation and improve communication and services, but it would also assist the adult, women students' desire to contribute to the success of other adult, female students.

The role of each participant's aspirational capital in her decision to persist at CCC was a key finding of this study. Community college student affairs staff, faculty, and administrators need to be made aware of the powerful presence of this capital for this subgroup of their students and educated as to how best to assist students in the extrication and implementation of this capital. Community colleges should also implement workshops or seminars for adult, female students to help them discover, build, and utilize their own aspirational capital. Another way to help female students examine and explore their aspirational capital is through the offering of women's studies courses. The development of a women's center on a community college campus would give female students a safe and nurturing place to learn more about themselves and other women while also sharing experiences and ideas. By assisting students in the employment of aspirational capital, community college faculty and staff will not only support students' persistence at the institution but will also encourage the students to utilize their own empowered will and determination for success long after they leave the campus.

Participants in the study indicated they had both positive and negative experiences on CCC campuses. Yet, although the negative experiences occurred on other CCC campuses, not the downtown campus, the salient issue arising from this was that the downtown campus has the reputation of being the place where diverse students belong and not at the other CCC campuses. For the participants in this

study this idea of diversity meant everything from having an international background for Linda, to race for Shelley, to age for Jen, Melanie, and Annie. Administrators, faculty, and staff could assess the environment on their campus to determine the openness and sense of welcome extended to diverse students as well as what strategies could be implemented to improve that environment, if need be.

A segment of the positive campus experiences for the study's participants included the presence of caring and attentive faculty members at the downtown campus of CCC. Although more focused, and perhaps individual, attention may not benefit some students, this type of response from the CCC faculty appeared to play a major role in the participants' feeling of belonging and acceptance at the downtown campus. The realization that this particular subgroup of the community college student body might positively respond to more individualized assistance may possibly assist community college faculty in creating a more welcoming learning environment for adult, part-time, women students.

In addition to being more attentive and providing more individualized attention it is important that community college faculty become more aware of the positive influence affirming gestures has on this group of students. Whether it is a comment reinforcing an adult female's decision to enroll in a particular course or kind words of encouragement on an assignment, these small gestures may be a critical component in the bolstering of a student's aspirational capital and thus, her persistence.

As the numbers of adult, female students continue to increase on community college campuses, special attention should be given to the implementation of

support services that address the academic, financial, and personal needs of these students. These support services could involve collaboration between admissions and financial aid, as well as tutoring and advising. As an example, the participants in this study indicated that although they may receive information about the need to complete a federal application for financial aid, they often must rely on other adult women to tell them about further resources that would assist them with nonacademic finances, such as rent, car repairs, or childcare. With regard to academics, Shelley indicated that another adult female student told her about free individual tutoring services available through the TRIO program; Shelley learned at the end of the spring semester, after she had dropped two classes because she could not get individual tutoring help, that she was eligible to participate in the TRIO program. Participants also spoke of the importance of being able to talk with others about private issues and challenges. To assist students in this endeavor CCC could add personal counselors to their staff, as many students are unable to afford private counseling or are unaware of the steps necessary to secure counseling services.

This study may also assist adult females who may be considering enrolling or re-enrolling at a community college. Through reading about the participants' experiences and encounters these potential students may gain valuable insight into potential challenges to their persistence and the importance of one's own aspirational capital in overcoming those challenges. Perhaps awareness of potential obstacles and the influence of aspirational capital will assist future adult female students in achieving their educational goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study may be a channel for other studies related to the exploration of the educational experiences of adult female students enrolled at community colleges and the factors influencing their decisions to persist. As a researcher interested in this topic, there are recommendations that I would offer to help contribute to the literature on issues related to adult student retention and community colleges.

This analysis should be conducted at other community colleges to see if there may be similarities in responses offered by participants. This research could also be expanded by focusing on the educational experiences and factors influencing decisions to persist for adult, male students enrolled part time at community colleges to see if there are similarities to their female counterparts. Likewise, this examination could be increased by focusing on adult, female students who are enrolled full time at a community college to see if there are similarities with those adult, female students who are enrolled part time. It would also be interesting to conduct this research with a focus on adult, female students enrolled part time at a 4-year institution to see if there are similarities with their community college counterparts.

This exploration could also be replicated with a focus on a subgroup of adult women students who were represented in this study. For instance, a study could be conducted of the educational experiences and factors influencing the decisions to persist for women who began their educational career while incarcerated. Other subgroups could include women who are single mothers and women who are international students.

Finally, the role of aspirational capital in student retention would also be an important topic to explore with adult students who attend community colleges to further explore its influence on the persistence of females as well as males. Moreover, an exploration of the influence of other types of capital, like those mentioned in critical race theory research, on the decisions to persist for adult, female students at community colleges would also contribute to the literature on retention of this student population.

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS

I remember when I started down this path known as writing a dissertation one of the seasoned, 3rd-year, doctoral candidates said to me, "It's all about the journey." I did not know exactly what she meant then and find that even today, I am still learning about this journey and myself along the way. However, there are a few things I have learned that I can share in this final chapter.

The first lesson I learned was not to take feedback about my work personally. Because I am a rather sensitive individual, I thought that this concept may only pertain to me. But, I witnessed this lesson first hand when a colleague became quite upset when receiving constructive criticism about his dissertation proposal. That taught me to remember that those around me on the journey offer advice and feedback not to belittle me or set me back but instead to help my research and me become stronger.

The second lesson I learned was that recruiting and retaining participants for a study is not as easy as it seems. As I began the process of recruiting participants, I thought it was going to be simple; after all, I thought I had secured my first participant before even going to the classroom where I was to do the bulk of my recruiting. By the end of the first recruiting effort, I had 3 participants, and after more visits to the campus, I had 2 more. But, as I described in chapter 3, one of the participants, the first one recruited as a matter of fact, would not return phone calls and missed scheduled interviews, so she was dropped. The process of finding

another participant to replace her was much more difficult than I had anticipated. I guess I thought that an adult woman enrolled at the community college would be interested enough in my topic that she would want to share her experiences and thoughts—I was mistaken. Thankfully the other 4 participants were terrific about keeping their scheduled appointments and being so forthcoming about their thoughts and experiences.

As for the participants who did complete the study: the lesson I learned from them was that I was undertaking a study that actually did mean something to someone. I also learned that I had listened to them and accurately heard what they were telling me. I learned all of this through the feedback I received via e-mail from two of the participants after I had sent them chapter 4 for member checking. The first participant to respond was Melanie who simply wrote, “You did a wonderful job!” The other participant to respond was Annie. During our conversations it seemed like Annie and I had built a nice relationship, so I was very touched when she wrote,

I read your whole study. I read what the other women had to say. Truthful and inspirational are the two words that come to mind. You expressed exactly what I wanted. Thank you for including me in your study. Thank you for taking the time to do this. I have a feeling it will help many women in the future. It showed that all women are in the same boat or at least rowing right next to one another. It's just another way we support each other. It's women like you that show us we need to come together. Thanks so much for your understanding and patience.

Every time I read that note from Annie I feel something well up inside as well as a sense of pride in what I have accomplished.

This leads to the final, and most important, lesson I learned and that was the profound affect this study, and more importantly the participants in this study, has had on me. Each time I would talk with someone about my study and its participants I would get goose bumps. I thought that was just part of the excitement of being in the process, but I find that sensation still occurs only now it occasionally gets accompanied by tears. The tears are not of sadness but of sincere respect and gratitude for the women who allowed me into their lives for the sake of this study. I genuinely respect their honesty and ability to utilize their aspirational capital, to not give up on their dreams, and to keep moving forward. They are an inspiration to me and I have told each of them so.

Now, more than ever, I feel as though I want to get back into the community college atmosphere so I can continue to work with, empower, and witness the successes of students like Linda, Melanie, Jen, Shelley, and Annie. For I know that there are many other students like these women who have dreams to share and goals to reach.

A new journey is now beginning.

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APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: **Why they persist: Exploring the educational experiences of adult women currently enrolled part-time at a Midwest community college**

Investigator: **Elizabeth M. Cox, M. Ed.**

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to describe the educational experiences and factors contributing to the decision to persist for adult, female, part-time students currently enrolled at a community college in the Midwest. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an adult female student currently enrolled part-time at a Midwest community college.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will consist of this appointment plus two more. Each appointment will last for approximately one hour. During the study you may expect the following procedures to be followed: you will be asked to participate in three interviews with the researcher plus keep a personal journal of your educational experiences between each of the interview sessions, which may be shared with the researcher. Each interview will be audio recorded for future transcription by the researcher. The audio recording will be erased on or before 06/30/08 and will be heard by the researcher and possibly an individual who may be hired to transcribe the recordings. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks at this time from participating in this study.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by assisting community colleges in the retention of adult female students.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: all data will be kept on a password protected computer or in a locked file cabinet in a locked office to which only the researcher has access. If the results are published or presented, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Dr. Larry Ebbers, N221A Lagomarcino Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011, (515) 294-8067, or lEBBERS@iastate.edu.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, jcs1959@iastate.edu, or Diane Ament, Director, Office of Research Assurances (515) 294-3115, dament@iastate.edu.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining
Informed Consent)

(Date)

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview I

1. Tell me about the factors that helped you decide to enroll at this community college.
2. Did anyone support you in your decision to become a student?
3. What did you do before becoming a student at this community college (i.e. employment)?
4. What does a typical day look like for you now?
5. What are the greatest challenges/stresses in your day?
6. What does it feel like to be an adult, female student at this community college?
7. What do you like about being an adult, female student?
8. What do you not like about being an adult, female student?
9. What factors influence your decision to remain enrolled at this community college?

Interview II

10. What has been your greatest challenge as an adult, female student?
11. Describe your experiences as an adult, female student in the classroom.
12. If you could change anything about your experiences at this community college, what would you change? What would you want to stay the same?
13. How has the experience of being a student affected you?

Interview III

Clarification of any questions and general participant reflections on the meaning their educational experience holds for them.