Postsecondary Re-Entry Programs: Examining Outcomes of Nontraditional Learners of Color

by

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Abstract

The narratives of nontraditional adult learners of color are explored to understand what

contributes to the social, behavioral, and academic outcomes of nontraditional adult learners

enrolled in a postsecondary reentry program at a Midwest university. An instrumental case study

will capture participants' varied experiences in this program to understand whether student

outcomes are affected by their enrollment in the designated postsecondary reentry program.

Examining the research from this perspective will provide context into the institutions' role in the

success of nontraditional learners of color.

Keywords: nontraditional, adult learners, reentry programs, race, postsecondary education

Chapter One: Introduction

Conventional methods of entry into postsecondary education, usually consisting of high school graduates living on-campus in a traditional four-year educational setting, have slowly given way to an exceedingly diverse and often older academic population. To address the shifting student demographics, institutions have incorporated virtual learning, flexible class scheduling, and specialized programs that cater to individuals pursuing an alternate route towards postsecondary attainment (Park & Choi, 2009). The variation in how learners can now receive instruction has normalized higher education for many nontraditional enrollees. However, more substantive structural changes are still needed to generate equitable educational outcomes for all. These structural changes may require institutions to reexamine faculty and student interactions and find new ways to address inequities in access to support resources on campus (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018).

Educational reentry programs are a viable response to the shifting labor force where adults attempting to meet the needs of a more educated, globalized workforce have begun to flock to as they seek to make themselves more employable (Rosser-Mims, Palmer & Harroff, 2014). Most research on the subject focuses specifically on recently incarcerated individuals looking to reengage into society (Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017), with a scarcity of literature available about reentry programs for other nontraditional populations. In the broadest of context, reentry programs are associated with universities and created to support nontraditional learners at risk of being left behind (Willans & Seary, 2011). Characteristics of these reentry programs will vary by institution and situation. Still, they frequently support

nontraditional learners for a specified time and often incorporate some form of financial and academic support (Wilkins, 2011).

Along with reentry programs, other institutional changes can go a long way towards helping underrepresented students succeed on their respective campuses. Older, less traditional learners face an abundance of barriers hindering academic growth and success. Research from Meister (2002) and Park and Choi (2009) found that 70% of nontraditional learners fail to complete their online course of study, and research by O'Shea and Stone (2011) determined that nontraditional students exhibited difficulty in balancing the roles between work, school, and life. Nonetheless, the age of students enrolling into post-secondary institutions continues to increase, and the challenges that adult learners face due to limited institutional interventions persist (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The growing demand for higher education among adults has shaped the way institutions tackle the academic and social needs of an aging community of learners. This study will provide a glimpse into the experiences of nontraditional learners and the influence that postsecondary reentry programs have on the learner's social and academic development.

It is vital to establish a shared understanding of what categorizes a nontraditional learner. The National Center for Education Statistics defines a nontraditional learner as someone who identifies with one of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrollment for one year or more after high school, (b) attends school part-time, (c) works full-time, (d) is financially independent, (e) has dependents, (f) is a single parent, and (g) holds a GED or other high school completion certificate other than a diploma (Choy, 2002; Ross, 2005). As defined in the study, nontraditional adult learners or *NALs* refer to individuals 25 years of age and older who meet one of the characteristics mentioned above. Included in this population are students who have attained some

postsecondary credits, disenrolled for an extended period, or have reenrolled in school to complete their degrees.

To support NALs as they reenter their respective educational spaces, defining the behavioral characteristics associated with this group will help craft policies needed to assist them in navigating a collection of complex social and academic obligations (Macdonald, 2018). NALs bring a unique set of perspectives and challenges that often contribute to disparities in achievement and outcomes. These learners tend to enroll in institutions of higher learning for reasons that may differ from their traditional counterparts. Some of these include social, environmental, economic, and cultural factors that have made it necessary for NALS to pursue an educational credential (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Motivation for reentry is often due to the anticipation of making themselves more competitive in the demanding job market and using educational advancement as an opportunity to enhance their social mobility (Markle, 2015). These extrinsic motivators are evident by the uptick in enrollment of adult learners into institutions of higher learning over the past two decades. According to research from Kena, et. al. (2016), the registration of nontraditional adult learners in non-profit and for-profit institutions has increased at a rate of 217% from 2000 to 2014. As of 2018, there is a total of 6.6 million adult learners enrolled in higher education (Gross, 2018). Along with the rapid influx of adult learners into higher education, universities have gradually delineated the differences in academic and social needs for NALs. These differences are evident in the rise in targeted programs designated to support this growing student population (Macdonald, 2018).

NALs have varied educational and environmental needs that institutions must consider. An article from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (Pelletier, 2010) stated, ""Adult students have a difficult time with the traditional format and structure—length of

semesters, parking on the campus, getting to a traditional campus with a traditional schedule

from their place of work" (p.3). The specific needs for adult learners extend beyond the

perceived institutional obligations stated above. Additional support is in the emotional and

personal sphere, where learners seek resources to balance their daily lives. Adult learners who

work full-time, support families, or pursue a career change may use self-actualization and

motivation to achieve their academic goals. Some NALs seek inspiration through intrinsic

motivators –self-fulfillment, personal satisfaction, and self-discovery. Other NALs may rely

entirely on extrinsic motivators - such as access to career opportunities and monetary gains from

the added educational credential. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators assist in psychologically

stimulating the learners to achieve their desired goals (Wolfgang & Dowling, 1981). Factors

outside of motivation are at play when examining the outcomes for nontraditional students,

specifically those of color.

Researchers from the National Center for Educational Statistics released a report which

concluded that, as of 2014, out of the 17.3 million undergraduates, 9.6 million were White, 3

million Hispanic, 2.4 million African American, and 1 million were Asian (Kena et al., 2015).

From 2000 to 2014, there was a 114% increase for Hispanic learners and a 57% increase for

African American learners (Woods, 2017). The data exhibits growing diversity rates in all forms,

including race, gender, age, and socio-economic status. Knowing that a demographic shift along

racial and ethnic lines exists, added emphasis is on the institutions' ability to support NALs from

marginalized communities. In this study, a learner of color is defined as a student with anything

other than European ancestry, encompassing students who identify as having African,

Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, or Indigenous origins. Research by Ross (2005) suggests that Black

students are more likely to be represented in a nontraditional age cohort (11%) than in a

traditional age cohort (8%). Yet, according to a 2002 study from the U.S. Department of
Education the completion rate for nontraditional Black learners was at (18%) compared to their
White counterparts enrolled in similar programs (33%). The data suggest that Black NALs are
not enrolling and completing their degree programs at the same rate as their White counterparts.
Through the narratives of the NALs of Color, information gathered during this study will
determine whether themes emerge from the stories and if these themes can answer questions
about the observed disparities in outcomes for this population. This insight will assist universities
in fully understanding how to support the personal growth, and academic development of adult
learners of color enrolled in the reentry program.

The personal experiences of NALs of color gathered will inform the social, behavioral,
and academic outcomes of adult learners enrolled in a reentry program at a Midwest institution.
The stories collected from participants in the reentry program will capture each student's voice
and unique perspective, allowing a greater understanding of the impact the program has had on
their academic and social outcomes. Examining the research from this perspective will provide
context to the institutions' role in supporting the nontraditional student population. This intrinsic
case study will emphasize the students' experience and engagement with the university's reentry
program. The researcher will interview multiple students to gain a concrete understanding of the
students' social and emotional development throughout the learner's enrollment in the reentry
program. These interviews will, in turn, provide suggestions on how institutions, communities,
and students can leverage resources, and each other, to support positive student outcomes.

Statement of Problem

Despite institutions of higher education outwardly acknowledging the desire to become
more inclusive to nontraditional adult learners and their unique needs, NALs of color continue to

face staunch barriers towards equitable access to resources, appropriate financial support, and academic interventions (Pelletier, 2010). These inequities in access are exacerbated by fluctuating economic conditions, evolving job markets, and increased socio-economic stratification among class and race. The noticeable increase in nontraditional learners pursuing higher education is the culmination of economic factors, societal conditions, and the desire to provide a better life for themselves (Markle, 2015; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Although issues related to postsecondary access for adult learners have improved for a vast majority of learners over the decades, certain minority groups still face an assortment of barriers that are often difficult to overcome. These barriers include disproportionately lower socio-economic status, higher poverty rates, unfortunate urban demographic realities, and the lack of resources to support educational costs (Ntiri, 2001).

Historically, postsecondary institutions in the United States began as privately governed entities accessible to those with some form of wealth, privilege, and power (Brown, 2013). During the early inception of these institutions, the societal beliefs limited certain rights to individuals outside of the dominant social class, leaving a glaring economic divide between the wealthy and those at the margins due to their race, gender, and socio-economic status. Hundreds of years after the creation of our nation's first private college, Harvard College, our country still deals with the same complex issue of diversity and inclusion, but in a different way. Over the past century, government policies began to shift, expanding educational rights to the working class, women, and people of color. A pivotal piece of legislation that helped support educational inclusion was the Morrill Act of 1862. The Morrill Act provided land grants to states to fund public institutions to benefit from agriculture and mechanical arts (Lytle, 2007). The Morrill act was one of the first instances where the federal government made higher education a right for

American citizens (Lytle, 2007). The passage of the second Morrill Act in 1890 appropriated

funds to create seventeen predominately African American colleges. Although used as a tool for

continued segregation, the Morrill Act expanded educational access to marginalized citizens; it

was a proclamation that higher education is a right granted to all Americans, regardless of

economic status or race (Wheatly, 2019). Other government initiatives also supported

educational equity in different ways. The 1944 GI Bill provided educational benefits to World

War II veterans, helping them get back on their feet post-wartime (Angrist & Chen, 2011). In

addition, the creation of the Normal School, or teacher training institutes, used to train high

school graduates on pedagogical and curricular practices, effectively opening the door for

women to enter the workforce and etch a new path towards academic and economic mobility

(Bordelon, 2014).

Even though higher education is now more widely accessible to individuals from all

backgrounds, due to stringent admissions practices and standards-based examinations, the ideals

of privilege and exceptionalism are still evident. These inequities are particularly noticeable

through restrictive qualifiers that further prevent marginalized groups from fully participating in

the learning process (Au, 2016). Meritocratic beliefs associated with educational attainment have

created a myopic view of postsecondary education, one in which the idea of rewarding the most

deserving has failed to acknowledge the impact of race and racism on educational opportunities

and outcomes (Brown, 2013; Patton, 2016). In the generations since the rise of America's first

institution of higher learning, higher education has steadily opened its doors of opportunity to

lower socio-economic, underrepresented communities. Still, drastic inequalities based on

nontraditional status and economic hierarchy further challenge many citizens looking to make a

better life through educational attainment (Alon, 2009).

According to Alon (2009), high-quality, four-year education is not as attainable as was once believed. Incrementally, students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) communities have made strides in educational attainment, mainly through increased access to two-year institutions. Still, four-year matriculation remains relatively elusive for specific populations of learners. Alon (2019) goes on to state, "Accordingly, inequality in higher education persists because higher education is not universal, even among the privileged. Moreover, when high-status groups reach saturation at a certain level of education, inequality simply shifts upwards to the next level of attainment, thereby perpetuating relative class differences" (p. 732). In short, those in the bottom rung of our economy, and no matter how tirelessly they work to close the educational attainment gap, continue to face an uphill battle towards leveling the playing field. An additional layer of complexity accompanies these class-based inequities, in that issues of racial injustice create an added barrier that some learners must overcome.

Patton (2016) addressed three ways racism and White supremacy have remained entrenched within higher education in the United States. First, the establishment of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in racism and White supremacy. Patton draws connections between ivy league education and slavery, stating that prominent founding members of many of America's prestigious private colleges were slave owners. Therefore, it can be believed that those in power created institutions of higher learning with no intention of servicing people of color. Secondly, U.S. higher education uses imperialistic and capitalistic efforts to fuel division along racial and economic lines. Patton argues that, historically, some institutions used slave labor to build and expand their campuses while simultaneously pillaging Native Americans for land. Today, this contentious relationship between race, power, and oppression is present in the institutions' centering of Whiteness in the curriculum, demographic composition, and

instructional practices,

Lastly, U.S. higher education serves as a venue through which formal knowledge production rooted in racism and White supremacy is promulgated. This belief alludes to Patton's view of higher education as a preserver of racist ideologies, where curriculum and knowledge marginalize the voices and experiences of people of color. Pine and Hilliard (1990) argued, "Historically, every academic discipline-psychology, biology, geography, religion, philosophy, anthropology, literature, history-has been used to justify colonialism and racism" (p. 595). Patton (2016) can affirm that the impact of race on the systems and outcomes of learners of color seeking to access our institutions of higher education has been substantial. This embedded system of racial inequity has created institutional barriers that overtly and covertly work to magnify the gap in educational attainment for learners on the margins of our society. As research begins to incorporate the problem associated with adult learners of color seeking to reenter these inequitable spaces, a compounding effect makes it exceedingly difficult to find solutions to these challenges.

Increasingly, adults are returning to postsecondary institutions to increase their access to opportunities for career advancement and greater wealth (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). This return is related to the competition for limited resources and the hope of expanding their social mobility and quality of life (Baronov, 2006). Social mobility incorporates an individual's educational attainment; a study by Uchida (2018) shows that equitable access to public education reduces the economic gap and encourages social mobility. Added benefits of educational attainment also include better jobs, access to adequate health care, higher-quality housing options, increased social capital, and educational opportunities for future generations (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). Unfortunately, adult learners of color have lower odds of successfully obtaining a postsecondary

credential, severely limiting their chances of social mobility (Chen, 2017). The low numbers of

adult learners of color enrolled in postsecondary institutions make it difficult for these

individuals to alter the trajectory of their lives and access opportunities that more privileged

groups are afforded. Adult learners of color often lack the institutional support needed to

effectively transition into their postsecondary environments (Chen, 2017). The unspoken rules

and norms imparted upon traditional college students are not easily accessible to those who fall

into the non-traditional student population due to limited immersion in the campus culture.

Historically, policies such as affirmative action have attempted to mitigate inequitable

practices that, due to race, ethnicity, or gender, hindered marginalized groups from gaining

employment and pursuing higher education. Affirmative action policies became a catalyst for

increased representation of marginalized people in postsecondary educational institutions and

within the American workforce (Blanchard & Crosby, 1989; Francis, 1993; Tierney, 2007).

Affirmative action was the understanding that racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination did exist,

and the government needed to safeguard underrepresented people from discriminatory

admissions and hiring practices across all sectors. When implemented, a competing narrative

claimed that judging an individual on merit alone was the sole basis of true societal equality,

without paying credence to the impact of race.

While affirmative action sought to level the playing field for citizens at the margins of

society, there was a growing emphasis on meritocracy as the prevailing means to evaluate an

individual's access to the workplace and educational opportunities. Meritocracy was a

mechanism for social control that only rewards those who are the best and the brightest

(Tierney, 2007). This zero-sum relationship suggests that another person's loss or gain is

balanced equally with another individual. Those who firmly believe in meritocratic systems

viewed affirmative action as its antithesis. For instance, Fischer and Massey (2007) expressed three significant critiques of affirmative action policies. These critiques included "(1) affirmative action constitutes reverse discrimination that lowers the odds of admission for 'better' qualified White students; (2) affirmative action creates a mismatch between the skills of the student and the abilities required for success at selective universities, thereby setting up beneficiaries for failure; (3) affirmative action stigmatizes all members the target group as unqualified, which results in demoralization and substandard performance regardless of individual qualifications" (p.532). Ultimately, merit-based practices led to implementing standards-based examinations as a point of access into the workplace and educational institutions. These practices have directly contributed to many of the inequities we continue to observe for adult learners from marginalized communities.

Adult learners of color are continuing to make strides to overcome the residual effects of decades of discriminatory practices. Over the last decade, a growing number of adult learners of color have gained access to learning communities that predominately catered to White men with high social status. Inclusion into these spaces is due to institutional practices used to alleviate biases that deter students of color from enrolling in postsecondary institutions (Carnevale & Fry, 2000). In this study, the researcher will observe institutional practices associated with postsecondary reentry programs in one Metro Detroit university. Adult learners of color's narratives at varying stages of their postsecondary journeys are monitored, recorded, and categorized. The information gathered in the study will assist in determining what factors have motivated these individuals to continue and complete their program of study and how their participation in this specifics reentry program has interacted with their systems of support. The use of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model will serve as a critical component of the

study, aiming to explore the impact that access to postsecondary educational opportunities has had on learners' emotional, economic and environmental development.

Rationale for Study

There has been extensive research in the field of adult education over the last few decades, providing a unique view into the needs and aspirations of these individuals (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Galbraith, 1990; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008; Macdonald, 2018; Manglitz, 2003). Yet, recent literature on nontraditional adult learners of color using a qualitative case study design has failed to include this approach. A qualitative case study is necessary for the following reasons: First, a case study will allow NALs of color to provide a first-hand account of their experience as students, giving a rich narrative that provides depth to the learners' experience. Secondly, the descriptions gathered will provide insight into the program's effectiveness and may create a blueprint for future changes. Lastly, the study will link reentry programs, the NAL of colors, and their social ecosystem. Studying this interaction can reveal whether changing a learner's immediate environment will also change other aspects of their environment, both physically and psychologically.

For this study, NALs of color currently enrolled in the designated reentry program will drive the research. Examining the experiences of nontraditional learners from this point of view will provide insight into the institution's role as an intercessor of student outcomes. Data collected throughout the process will strengthen understanding around what nontraditional students of color view as important factors to their academic and professional success and determine what barriers and challenges remain. Importantly, this information promises to illuminate what institutions can do to support the growth and development of marginalized communities looking to reenter into these spaces.

This study will center on a metropolitan region in a midwestern state, where people of color (Black, Hispanic, Asian, Mixed) make up 51% of the total population, where only 23.3% of individuals 25 + years old hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and where the median household income is around $45,321 (U.S. Census, 2016). This region is a magnet for educational programs dedicated to postsecondary access for underrepresented and economically disadvantaged citizens. The study will expose how student outcomes are developed and what specific aspects lead to success. Understanding the motivating factors contributing to adult learners' experiences and outcomes can create a blueprint for other organizations.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional adult learners of color enrolled in a postsecondary reentry program?

2. How does the institution influence the academic and social development of nontraditional adult learners?

Significance of Study

The potential significance of the study lies in the analysis and prediction of why some NALs of color are more likely to find success in their respective postsecondary reentry programs. In contrast, others may struggle to navigate these same institutions. The research explores this phenomenon to interpret whether success is due to internal causes such as self-efficacy, ambition, and motivation, or solely institutional factors. The study will infer whether the NAL of color's environments is a critical driver in achievement and overall outcomes. Findings can help eliminate barriers and design more inclusive learning communities for NALs. They can also support the university's understandings of the importance of formal and informal support structures. The exploration of institutions' influence on the student's experience will be

of great importance in the overall composition of the research study.

The social ecosystems of NALs of color can give perspective into how postsecondary reentry programs support the development of the whole learner, not just from an academic lens. The learner's social ecosystem provides a unique view of the world that shapes both their educational and social experience. The vast multitude of systems interactions cultivates a reciprocal relationship between the learner and their environments. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model will be of great importance to this study, providing a framework for categorizing results.

Additional significance exists in the study's potential in addressing issues related to access and retention of adult learners of color who participate in these educational environments. The first-hand account of the student experience in the designated reentry program can assist in the development of new strategies for institutions seeking to support the nontraditional learning community effectively. Postsecondary institutions must be willing to reconfigure policies that address their recruitment and retention strategies for nontraditional learners, especially if they desire to increase the matriculation rate for the adult learner population on campus. Added emphasis is on the characteristics associated with one postsecondary reentry program. Their experiences will determine whether a specific approach helps address nontraditional learners of color's educational inequities. Homing in on specific programmatic characteristics will assess whether the learners' perception of their educational experience aligns with policies and procedures enacted by the reentry program to support student success.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The literature review will examine the concepts of Andragogy (adult education), Critical Race Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to highlight how each of the three theoretical frameworks holistically supports the overall growth and development of nontraditional learners of color. This section will firmly distinguish between adult learners' needs compared to their traditional counterparts while examining the impact of race, culture, and language on learners of color. Additionally, the literature in the section will inform how systems-level interactions influence individual behaviors. In addition to recognizing how these theories work interdependently within a more extensive societal system, the literature review will seek to contextualize the relevance and shortcomings of each approach.

As the research delves into the unique complexities associated with the experience of adult learners, it is essential to examine the history of Andragogy or adult learning. Taking a deep dive into the early development of adult learning practices can provide a reasonable frame of reference that will support institutions as they address similar challenges today. Furthermore, a critical analysis of the most renowned adult learning theorists, Alexander Kapp, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, and Malcolm S. Knowles, will help guide the study's ability to interpret why some adult learners succeed in their specific educational environments while others struggle to thrive in similar situations.

To be clear, these theorists and their interpretation of adult learning do not fully address the concerns related to effectively supporting NALs. In many instances, the work of Kapp and Knowles only adds a layer of complexity to the already murky field of adult education.

Fortunately, these theorists provide a relevant framework through which the research can examine and critique the effectiveness of the adult learning process. The literature review will also discuss specific characteristics of adult learning that must be considered when supporting this growing segment of the learning population. It will provide a blueprint that reentry programs can use to support the implementation of policies and practices to increase the likelihood of success for NALs.

A critique of adult learning theory will be used to examine how Malcolm S. Knowles' impartial take on adult learning failed to acknowledge the systemic impact that race and racism have on the learners' ability to navigate their educational environments. The literature will assess the impact that race has on adult learners of color, specifically by viewing adult learning through the framework of Critical Race Theory that looks at aspects of counter storytelling, culturally reflective teaching, and intersectionality. The research will examine the learning and unlearning of marginalized communities as a form of resistance and, in the process, determine whether NALs of color who seek to enter these educational spaces are doing so to uplift their communities and break the chains of oppression or perpetuate the standards associated with the dominant social class and their view of social and economic success.

Lastly, the research will incorporate the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and his Ecological Systems Model to understand how systems of learning, centered explicitly on learners of color, influences the behavior, environment, and outcomes of these students. The research will delve into the consequences that postsecondary reentry programs, viewed as a form of environmental intervention on adult learners, have on the various ecological systems of these learners. Viewing Bronfenbrenner's model from this perspective provides a tangible assessment of the impact that one's interactions across multiple environments have on the individual's self-

actualization and efficacy. Just as educational experience impacts a child's behavioral

development, this section will examine how additional external factors influence adult learners'

view of themselves and the world.

History of Andragogy (Adult Learning)

Much confusion surrounds the concept of *andragogy*, or adult learning, especially when

comparing the term to *pedagogy*, which is a commonly known teaching method. Within the root

of each word lies the Greek term "gogy," which translates to *leading*, with "Peda" referring to

the child and "Andra" referring to the adult. Each theory centers on the art and science associated

with teaching (Forrest & Peterson, 2006). The art and science of educating adult learners have a

history deeply rooted in Hellenistic civilizations. Ancient Greeks were one of the first

civilizations to incorporate the philosophical idea of lifelong learning (Savicevic, 2008), a

significant characteristic of adult learning. Ancient Romans, Egyptians, and Greeks were all

known to educate themselves through various methods, including the arts, sciences, and

literature, even when formal educational structures were not yet developed (Savicevic, 2008).

Even some of the great philosophers of the time, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were

considered early practitioners in the method of adult learning (Grattan, 1955).

Although the historical relevance of adult learning goes back to early civilization, the

modern use of the learning approach was not broadly studied until the emergence of a German

teacher, Alexander Kapp, who viewed learning as more than a function designed for school-aged

children (Loeng, 2017). Among Kapp's first significant contributions to the concept of adult

learning, his 1833 book entitled "Plato's Educational Theory: As Pedagogy for the Individual and

as a State Education: or Its Practical Philosophy" was an examination of learning as a multistep

process where adults play an active role (Kapp, 1833). Plato's educational theory centered on the

idea that education should value the development of a learner's intellectual character over anything else. It focused on aspects of building one's morality and virtue and zealously opposed the idea of forcing knowledge upon others (Kotsonis, 2020). Kapp's view of adult education was more practical, believing education must be grounded in the vocations and trades to be valuable (Loeng, 2017, p.634). Kapp also believed that education could be extrapolated into four distinct subthemes, each of which is pivotal to the individual's overall success. These four themes found within Kapp's book include -- *Education before birth (Propädeutik)* which is education for marriage and family, specifically including the father's role. *Pedagogy (Pädagogik)* explores child and youth education, emphasizing the formation of the child's soul and spirit in the face of cultural traditions such as poetry, music, science, and philosophy. *Andragogy (Andragogik)* includes education in adulthood, and *State pedagogy (Poliagogik)* is education through the state, which is state-sponsored educational programs (Loeng, 2017).

The themes above share the assumption that the experience of learning is a continuous activity that does not begin nor end at the grade school level. Kapp highlighted this idea of constant learning by declaring, "It's not only the young ones it is important to seek, if possible, the best teachers, because adult men also have the same need since they should not remain in the state they now are in." (p. 241). Even though Kapp is considered an early pioneer of adult learning in Europe, his work was never entirely given the recognition it warranted. It was not until nearly one hundred years later when Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a scholar in adult education in 1920s Germany, revitalized the concept. With a redefined purpose, Hussey and a group of scholars called *Hoehenrodeter Bund*, named after where they first met in Germany, wanted to find a method to support adult learners as they move toward improving society's social and political sense (Leong, 2013). Hussey's understanding of adult education centered on the

thought that adults directly impact societal outcomes; therefore, communities must educate adults to become productive and worthwhile community members by working and learning together. Along with developing new research in adult education, Hussey established two programs, the *Academy of Labor* and the *Work Camp Movement*, which provided adults the opportunity to learn skills that supported public projects, similar to vocational programs. Unfortunately, these programs were used by Nazi Germany as indoctrination camps in the 1930s (Leong, 2013, p.3).

While Kapp pioneered adult learning, and Rosenstock-Huessy gave the concept modest attention in the 1920s and 30s, Malcolm Knowles steered the idea towards new heights from 1950 and beyond. Knowles was able to adopt the study of adult learning and apply it to a different context when he brought his variation of the method to North America. Knowles has been referred to as a seminal figure in adult education, especially amongst educational practitioners in North America. Still, as we know, he was far from the first person to study the impact of this practice. While Kapp viewed adult learning as a process of continuing education that is intertwined with the concept of human development, and Hussey prescribed a socio-political context to it, Knowles was more so curious about environments. Knowles sought to understand how physical and psychological development can assist in the educational outcomes of adult learners (Knowles, 1984; Tough, 1985). Knowles examined, in detail, the specific traits and motivations associated with adults and their process of learning. Some distinction between the needs of child learners and adult learners is predicated solely on the social-emotional needs of each group. These characteristics and differences in learning associated with adults became the foundation of Knowles' research. It drastically shifted how educators address how they teach adult students in the postsecondary environment.

Knowles' emphatically exclaimed that he was neither the founder of the idea of adult learning nor the sole expert in the topic. Still, he was able to apply the process of andragogy in a way that early European scholars in the field had failed to acknowledge (Tough & Knowles, 1985). He was able to apply the practice of adult learning to several settings that reached far beyond the student-teacher setting. Knowles applied his work to areas including continuing education practices, secondary and remedial education, religious education, business and government, and professional education. The widespread use of Knowles' work in North America had made him one of the most eminent figures in the field of adult learning. In the sections to follow, a critical lens will underscore the substance of Malcolm Knowles' work on adult learning.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Knowles identified four key characteristics that define the process of learning for adults (Knowles, 1974):

- *Adult learners as self-directed:* Adult learners are not dependent on the instructor to support knowledge and understanding.

- *Learners lived experiences:* Adult learners come from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences. These experiences amplify the learning process by providing an additional lens by which knowledge is amassed.

- *Active participation:* Adult learners are often eager participants in the learning process. They voluntarily enter these spaces and are actively engaged in their learning.

- *Motivation:* Internal and external motivators push adult learners towards an intended goal. Adult learners are more likely to pursue learning due to these factors.

Knowles fundamentally believed that learning is an internal process that trusts in the

individual learner's ability to grow and evolve towards maximum potential, but only when

provided the appropriate support (Henschke, 2008). Within the greater context lies the

understanding of the relational role between the instructor and the learner. The instructor, nor

the institution itself, was the main conduit for the success of the adult learner; it is the

learner's willingness to take ownership of their educational experience, apply the academic

curriculum to personal situations, and use their unique knowledge to benefit their learning.

The characteristics of andragogy can also be applied in non-academic settings. Some

researchers have examined adult learning from a management perspective, which is about

using knowledge to support workplace success. The researchers ultimately found that

instructors who allow adult learners to act as active participants in the curriculum planning

process were more apt to solve real-world business problems (Forrest & Peterson, 2006 cited

in Chan, 2010).

Table 1

Pedagogical Andragogical Learning Assumptions

	Pedagogy	Andragogy
Self-Concept	Learners are dependent on external sources such as an instructor to assess and provide their needs.	Learners are aware of themselves and their needs and bring this knowledge to the educational activity.
Learner's Experience	Learners bring little experience to the educational activity and thus experience is not used in the learning process.	Learners bring a wealth of usable experience and knowledge to the educational activity, thus experience is used in the learning process.
Readiness to Learn	The need to know develops from external forces; often an instructor mandating the learning process that should take place.	The need to know develops from an internal need to better address roles and responsibilities the learner faces.
Learning Orientation	Subject or Teacher Centered	Problem or Performance Centered

Note. Reprinted from Forrest, S. P., & Peterson, T. O. (2006). It's called andragogy. *Academy of*

Management Learning & Education, 5(1), 113-122.

In Table 1, Forrest and Peterson (2006) provided an alternate format through which the characteristics of adult learning were viewed. In this instance, researchers decided to juxtapose adult-centered knowledge acquisition to child-centered learning. The following factors: *self-concept, learner's experience, readiness to learn,* and *learning orientation* act as a backdrop highlighting the stark differences in how children and adults obtain their knowledge. Knowles argued that even though children and adults both use education for similar functions, there are distinct differences in the act of processing information and using their experiences to support learning (Knowles, 1984). The characteristics above are categorical learning objectives that are unique to adult learners and act as an integral factor in the successful acclimation of adults to their educational environment. For instance, the idea of utilizing one's lived experience to influence the directive of one's learning is something that adults can more effortlessly incorporate due to their vast life experience. This concept has roots in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, where an instructional process is a mutual contract between the student and the teacher. Incorporating a student's lived experiences is a fundamental part of the interconnection between learning and teaching (Freire, 1970). Adult learners tend to have more life experience; therefore, what is contributed from a non-academic perspective must be acknowledged and appreciated for them to feel included (Knowles, 1984). In addition, the other qualities mentioned above are common traits of pedagogy as well, but the extent to which adult learners abide by these measures is different.

Some educational practitioners have emphasized the need for adult education to become more facilitative and driven by the learner. The traditional role of education gives absolute power to the instructor as the sole disseminator of knowledge, which fails to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge adults bring to the classroom (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). Kenner and

Weinerman (2011) developed a list of strategies to help adults adapt to their new educational environments and take ownership of their learning. The researchers developed the idea of *framing*, a concept that allows the adult to reengage in the learning process by showing the immediate benefits of education on students' academic outcomes (p.92). Suppose the student can make the closest connection between the curriculum and its relevance to the learner's background and experience, the chances of success increase. In the sections to follow, the motivations of adult learners are noted, and Knowles' work will be examined to determine the potential flaws that exist within the concept of andragogy.

Motivation to Learn

Adults seek entry into postsecondary institutions for various reasons, including family, income, personal satisfaction, and career outcomes (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). These intrinsic and extrinsic motivators become the driving force behind their decision to pursue higher education. The term *motivation* is linked to the concept of human choice, which is defined as a human being's ability to choose the life in which they want to live (Welzel, Inglehart & Kligemann, 2003). It involves the ability to energize an individual to the extent in which they complete a task (Galbraith, 1990). Concerning how helpful motivation becomes in the classroom setting, it is a process of self-determination, accountability, and deliberate engagement in the learning experience between the teacher and student. It involves making a conscious effort on the part of the learner to put in the optimal amount of effort needed to become an effective student (McMillan & Forsyth, 1991).

A theory to support an individuals' motivation developed by Weiner (2000) examined motivation from an attributional perspective. Weiner's work emphasized motivation attribution into two categories: (1) *intrapersonal* and (2) *interpersonal. Intrapersonal motivation attribution*

is the individual's behavioral reaction to an event. For reference, Weiner described the results of

a student failing an exam and their response to the outcome. The students' failure will influence

their motivation and subsequent reaction to that situation. This internalization is ultimately the

difference between a student dropping out of school or succeeding despite their lousy grade. On

the other end, *interpersonal motivation attribution* is a reaction to a scenario outside of the

control of the individual. For instance, if the child failed an exam due to a cognitive issue, those

around that student may attribute that student's outcome to the student's cognitive ability. The

motivation to improve the learner's outcomes under *interpersonal motivational attribution*

moves from the student's sole responsibility to the teacher, parent, and school. For adult learners,

motivation falls into both the inter and intrapersonal categories, and institutions and instructors

must remain aware of their role in motivating and affirming the behaviors and outcomes of adult

learners.

Motivation is often at the core of academic performance for adult learners. A study by

Sogunro (2014) employed a mixed research approach with 203 adult learners enrolled in

postsecondary programs across the United States. These programs looked specifically at adults

enrolled in master's degree programs in various departments. Sogunro suggested the

participant's motivation for continuing education relied on eight key factors. These included: 1)

Quality of instruction 2) Quality of curriculum 3) Relevance 4) Classroom interaction 5)

Progressive assessment/timely feedback 6) self-directedness 7) Conducive learning environment

8) Advising practices. The research confirmed that students who felt their respective institutions

met these key factors experienced higher academic achievement and greater emotional

intelligence. Although the motivators listed above fall primarily within the institution's purview,

this does not negate that adult learners need to share some semblance of external investment in

their educational experience.

A study by Thomas (2001) explored the motivations of Black women enrolled in a transitional reentry program to determine what motivated them to continue their education. The study results suggest that the participants were encouraged to reenter college because of the salience of education, meaning that their education has personal and professional importance. A vast majority of the participants (85.6%) believe that education is more important to them now than ten years ago. Almost all the participants were motivated by pursuing a personal goal. In a similar study by Goings (2016), the research investigated the narratives of high-achieving nontraditional Black males at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). The study highlighted the role of peers and family members as primary contributors of motivation for the adult learner. In essence, many adult learners use inspiration to achieve a goal or pursue economic stability. Still, some learners are also motivated by the people in their social networks who keep them focused.

Critique of Adult learning

Although the theoretical concept of adult learning seems viable on the surface, the theory is not without its share of criticism. In its most recent use under Malcolm S. Knowles, adult learning is a particularly vague concept. Due to the lack of empirical evidence to back up the claims made by Knowles, every researcher after that has interpreted the idea differently. Rachal (2002) stated,

> The empirical literature examining the efficacy of andragogy remains, after over three decades, both inconclusive and beset by considerable variability in definition, resulting in differing approaches to andragogy's implementation…the current muddle of definitions and implementations has effectually stalled research. Unless that discussion reaches some

approximate consensus, adult education's most familiar and most debated theory will

remain a fragmented article of faith at best, a fond illusion at worst. (p.210)

The quote above explicitly states that andragogy falls flat when considering an empirical

interpretation of its effectiveness. Inability to reach a consensus concerning how the theory

is defined and utilized makes it less helpful in researching its impact on achievement for

learners. A more concise definition of Andragogy is required to support future research on

the topic.

Education is a means to free learners from the system that oppresses them, yet

Knowles fails to acknowledge the plight of marginalized people. Rachal (2002) highlights

numerous objectors to the work and credibility of Knowles's approach. One critique states

dissatisfaction in Knowles' approach to using adult learning as a tool to liberate the

marginalized. "Because of this perspective, adult education has abandoned its once vital role

in fostering democratic social action, is on a shaky foundation, works to the advantage of

large-scale organizations, and is conceptually inadequate to serve the interests of the

disenfranchised in North American society" (Welton, 2005 cited in Henschke, 2008, p.46).

This direct quote infers that Knowles' approach to adult learning must do more to liberate

the learner's minds, like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Other researchers such

as Grace (2001) believed that adult education failed to live up to its expectations when first

introduced in the 1970s. Grace felt that andragogy "ignored resistance and transformation

and saw mainstream U.S. and Canadian adult education as having been complicit in

sidelining cultural and social concerns, thus depoliticizing and de-contextualizing adult

learning" (Grace, 2001 cited in Henschke, 2008, p.47). The reason Grace felt adult learners'

social and cultural concerns were ignored stemmed from Knowles' inability to center the

learners' identity and sociocultural environment into their overall learning experience. Knowles took a generalized approach to adult learning, where differentiated experiences were not acknowledged as integral to the learning process. He suggests that not centering the adult learners' collective identity related to race, class, gender, and other uniquely diverse experience perpetuates systemic inequities and undervalues the role that a learners' identity has in supporting their educational experience. Therefore, andragogy must be modified to account for the impact race and racism have on teaching adult learners. Without incorporating this essential factor, educational institutions and instructors will fail to accurately support the learners' unique cultural and environmental needs. This notion will become evident in the chapters to follow when critical race is incorporated into the discussion around effective education for adult learners of color.

Knowles' work must better incorporate evidence to ensure the validity of the message that he intends to convey. According to Rachal (2002), Knowles' definition of andragogy as the "art and science of adult learning" does little to incorporate empirical data to help lend credence to the theory as one that uses scientific research. Critics suggest pedagogy lacks empirically backed data to bolster its effectiveness claims. The difference is that pedagogy has had wider exposure across multiple disciplines and a greater depth of qualitative analysis. The lack of quality assessments--qualitative, quantitative, or otherwise--is viewed as a direct challenge to the strength of Knowles' research.

Additionally, other researchers believe that Knowles's distinction between pedagogy and andragogy is unnecessary. Instead, the two learning methods for children and adults connect on a linear plane (Levitt, 1979). Ultimately, the critique given to Knowles' interpretation of adult learning is warranted. It is necessary to determine how practitioners

can effectively support their adult learners' growth and educational achievement.

Summary

Understanding the historical significance of andragogy is crucial to identifying how this theoretical framework can support the academic success of adult learners, especially learners of color. Examining adult learning as an undefined approach to teaching and learning used during the Hellenic era, to the modern incorporation of andrological methods constructed by the likes of Alexander Kapp, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, and Malcolm Knowles; is essential in providing context to the "how" and "why" of adult learning. This historical context allows other researchers to infer new ways to support the growth of students of all ages and backgrounds. Examining the characteristics and motivations specific to the experiences of adult learners helps to discern the unique needs and aspirations of adults who are reentering these educational institutions. Furthermore, andragogy will be framed from the perspective of Critical Race Theory to investigate how racial inequities often impact the systems and structures used to support adult learners. The bevy of research used in the following section will shed light on the steps academic institutions are taking to identify the inequities that create additional barriers for non-traditional students of color as they seek to navigate their respective educational experiences.

Race and Adult Education Through Literature

Research on the topic of adult education and the African American experience has a deep and rich history that few have come to recognize: a narrative that called on scholars and practitioners to use their collective voices to challenge the status quo in adult education. Many major educational publications led to criticism towards adult education during the early to mid-1900s. For example, Johnson-Bailey (2001) references the *Handbook for Adult and Continuing Education,* the quintessential journal for topics of interest in the field of adult education, which

had multiple chapters dedicated to the experience of people of color and the challenges they face

as adult learners. Chapters on similar topics were published numerous times, spanning across

two decades in this publication, with the first appearing in 1934. Johnson-Bailey stated, "The

1934 *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* and the succeeding 1936 Handbook had

chapters on 'Adult Education for Negroes' (Locke 1936, Rowden 1934). In 1948, the next

published Handbook excluded Negro Adult Education but had a chapter on 'Adult Education of

the American Indians' (McCurtain 1948) (p.92)." The excerpt above is an example of research

taking incremental steps to acknowledge the experience of individuals outside of the margin of

our society. Unfortunately, even though the plight of people of color was highlighted in the text,

there was little substantive discourse regarding the benefit that adult education had on these

individuals' social or economic stabilization.

     Issues related to the lack of response to challenges facing the Black community in adult

education was offered in a publication called the *Bronze Booklet*, edited and released by Alain

Locke, a Black scholar from Harvard and former President of the American Association for

Adult Education, was frequently cited for critiquing the lack of response from practitioners to

challenges related to race and adult education (Johnson-Bailey, 2006). Throughout the decades,

other education publications joined in on the conversation, and in 1945, the J*ournal of Negro

Education* dedicated an issue of the journal to "Adult Education and the Negro" (Closson, 2010).

Closson describes how the journal Adult Education and the Negro, began to overtly challenge

the lack of response to issues of race and adult education in the United States, which sparked a

significant turning point for conversations about race in the field. Subsequently, conferences

dedicated to race and adult education were created, signaling the importance and necessity of this

work (Guy 1996).

Significant progress in research on the topic of race and adult education began to emerge with more prominence in the 1990s and beyond. Much of the rise in the collective critical consciousness of adult educational scholars is directly related to the push for more scholarship on critical race in the field of education in general (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). More publications incorporated topics that examined intersectionality on a deeper scale (Hayes and Colin, 1994), and overall, more educational scholars began to address problems associated with the African American learning experience. The implications of race on people of color's collective experience have transcended mere social discourse; it has also shaped how learners of color use education as a form of resistance and unlearning.

Critical Race and Adult Education

Literature and history associated with the Black American experience with education, and the impact of race on other institutional structures, strengthened towards the end of the 20th century with the development of a theory critiquing race and society. Critical Race Theory or CRT examines the impact that race, privilege, and power have on constructing our societal structures. The concept's history grew from the work of critical legal scholars (CLS), who were a group of progressive faculty members, students, and lawyers who believed that race was a social construct, used as a basis by which policies, laws, and systems were governed (Closson, 2010). CLS stemmed from the belief that "legal ideology has helped create, support, and legitimate America's present class structure" (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1350). Critical Race Theory was viewed as a variant of critical legal scholarship and introduced into education in the mid-'90s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical Race Theory critiqued teacher preparation practices (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Pane &Rocco, 2012), educational research (Chapman, 2007; Duncan, 2002; Parker, 2015), and higher education (Patton, 2016).

Adult learning has gained more attention increasingly from scholars in the field of education (Closson, 2010). Early attempts at examining adult education through the framework of race have been wide-ranging and incorporated other theoretical positions, such as gender identity and race, to explain how identity affects learning. For instance, Closson linked aspects of Black Feminist Thought to adult learning to highlight the necessity for higher education institutions to address the plight of those who face double marginalization.

Whereas some adult education scholars have shied away from overtly incorporating issues of race and identity into their scholarship, many Black feminist thought leaders in the field of adult education were some of the first to center Blackness and Womanhood into the conversation around learning. The valuing of marginalized perspectives brings a deeper understanding of the impact of race on the systems in which students navigate.

The use of Critical Race Theory in adult learning has benefitted from utilizing many epistemological ideations. From the passage above, critical race theorists understood that Afrocentrism supported the claims that researchers believed epitomized the basis for the black experience in adult education. The coupling of Afrocentrism with concepts of gender identity found in Black Feminist Thought provided a unique lens through which scholars could better understand the effects of intersectionality within the educational experience of this marginalized group. The research will highlight how race has historically embedded itself within postsecondary education and adult learning systems in the sections to follow. The remnants of racialized policies have fully entrenched into the fabric of our educational systems. Still, it remains up to the dominant societal groups to willfully acknowledge the injustices that racial prejudice and policy have created if institutions are to level the playing field (Sefa Dei, 1999).

The implications of race on people of colors' collective experience have transcended mere

social discourse; it has also shaped how adult learners of color use education as a form of resistance and unlearning. The sections to follow will highlight the need to create spaces of learning that are culturally reflective of the population that these institutions serve. Critical discourse centered on race and adult learning has led to intentional action among the learners themselves to disrupt the social norms and shift the narrative associated with the educational attainment for learners of color.

Culturally Reflective Instruction

A vast amount of research examines how and why increasing diversity among faculty is an essential practice to the successful inclusion of students from underrepresented communities (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, Bonous-Hammarth, & Stassen, 2000; Harleston & Knowles, 1997; Milem, 2000; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Moody, 2004; Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004; Smith, Wolf, & Busenberg, 1996; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). These researchers have conducted extensive studies to demonstrate how students learn best when the person that is teaching the class is reflective of their background and culture. Research suggests that people of color are vastly underrepresented in the world of academia. According to a study by Weinberg (2008), the number of Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native -American/Alaskan Native full-time instructional faculty was at 10.5% in 2003 (p.366). The lack of representation of people of color in faculty positions suggests that more is required to increase diversity within their ranks. In addition, the institution itself must be willing to create a learning environment that is representative of an exceedingly diverse student population.

What if representation only matters to a certain extent, and what truly made our institutions more inclusive was how and what we taught? Researchers have extensively examined the effects of culturally reflective instruction on the primary and secondary levels to

understand how language and culture impact teaching practices (Cazden, 2001). But many of our postsecondary institutions have not studied culturally reflective instruction as extensively. Culturally reflective instruction is considered anything from language, communication styles to the curriculum taught in the classroom that incorporates diverse perspectives. Having a diverse representation of faculty and instructors is crucial to a learner of color's psychological development. Ultimately, culturally reflective instructional practices can make up for any lack of diversity on the instructional level (Cazden, 2001).

Researchers have concluded that the race or ethnicity of the classroom teacher does not necessarily contribute to the student's academic success (Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Some researchers have argued that culturally relevant and reflective teaching practices can be more applicable to student achievement in the classroom than the teacher's race (Rex, 2006). Teachers who may not reflect the race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation of their students have the immense responsibility of being conscious of their use of language and how their implicit biases may become an unknowing barrier. In a study conducted by Thomas (2013), she described the idea of *language crossing.* This idea represents the multidimensional aspect of a classroom and how the teacher and the students' identities, cultures, and norms overlap within this shared space. A culturally relevant and reflective teacher views the students as experts within their own cultures; instead of forcing a student to conform to a set of standards, teachers would utilize the cultural differences of their students in the development of inclusive learning communities.

The difficulty that postsecondary institutions face in their attempt to implement a culturally relevant discourse in the classroom is the lack of teacher training opportunities for instructors. Many instructors are not required to take courses that build classroom development

skills simply because these instructors are not traditional primary or secondary teachers. Most

instructors are considered experts in their field of study, which their primary responsibilities are

to lecture students on their area of expertise. This lack of classroom development leads to a gap

in knowledge needed to manage a classroom and effectively support diverse learners

successfully. Providing instructors with a set of best practices and various opportunities for

teacher development strategies can create more inclusive learning environments for their

students.

Additionally, the structure of power between the students and instructors in college

classrooms can be interpreted as imbalanced. This imbalance creates disproportionate access to

power and opportunity in the school (Lemke, 1995), especially as adult learners come into the

classroom with lived experiences that are different, if not greater, than their traditional

counterparts. Challenging the power dynamics in the classroom and viewing all students as

"experts" of their respective cultures can move us towards a more balanced and effective

classroom.

The Discourse of the Oppressed

The marginalization of people based on ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation,

and religion has created a system of oppression that spreads throughout societal institutions and

cultures. This oppression has been exacerbated through ideology, actions, and discourse,

ultimately affecting marginalized groups' opportunities. Freire (1970) used the idea of critical

theory and critical pedagogy to critique the current social condition and liberate oppressed

people by holding up a mirror to the inequities that keep them bonded. He also argued that the

traditional form of education requires the student to rely on the teacher for their knowledge,

described as the "banking model" of education. This structured approach to education strips the

students of their identity and places the teacher at the center of learning. Freire argues that the oppressed must reject this learning model and replace it with a "problem-posing" model that allows the learner to shape their knowledge using their own lived experiences, equalizing the relationship between the student and teacher. Emphasis on students' voices and incorporating the learners' lived experiences is necessary for the liberation process. This emphasis on students' voices requires a shift in perspective, allowing them to take ownership of their knowledge and move themselves to the center of the conversation.

Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016) examined the concept of macro discourse and its impact on students of color enrolled in grade school. The research described how the systems in which students learn uses language that is foreign to students of color. These systems are the traditional academic structures that teachers reinforce as the correct standard that students must conform to, without regard to the students' lived experiences and unique language they hold. Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016) state,

> Macro discourses are culturally saturated (often by traditional and normative conceptions grounded in ethnocentric perspectives) and thus should be problematized by individuals, who can otherwise become colonized by them and engage in oppressive practices as a result. Examples of such macro discourses include the focus on college and career readiness (even in the earliest years) furthered by Common Core State Standards and the concept of grit (posited as an educational imperative by many). As researchers, we are aware that our positionalities as teacher educators of color and former classroom teachers prepared in traditional university-based teacher education programs have influenced our identification of macro discourses within the narratives of our participants. More specifically, our positionalities may have obfuscated the

presence of institutional discourses unfamiliar to our lives, contexts, structures, and

social situations. (p. 13)

Institutions must recognize that adult learners of color will fall victim to oppression through the

coded systems of language perpetuated by many postsecondary institutions. To foster truly

inclusive environments receptive to the diverse nontraditional learning population, institutions

must analyze how discourse occurs in the classroom.

As stated previously, Freire (1970) believed that education had historically used a

banking method of instruction, where teachers are the sole disseminators of knowledge, and the

students are gleefully absorbing the information. This form of teaching prevents students from

fully incorporating their identity and lived experience into the classroom. Alternatively, students

from lower socio-economic backgrounds face additional forms of oppression, which is

frequently due to their economic environment. The research of Anyon (1980) discusses the

concept of the hidden curriculum of social class. This idea of the hidden curriculum alludes to

the use of methods of teaching students that are not in the written curriculum. These are school

norms, non-verbal commands, and other actions that play a role in subconsciously educating

students. Students from poor communities faced interactions that prepared them for a working-

class life. At the same time, their wealthier counterparts are taught in a style that prepares them

for middle and upper-middle-class lifestyles. In the arena of higher education, it is safe to assume

that most of those students who walk the halls of college campuses were, in effect, beneficiaries

of this hidden curriculum. Our institutions now have the challenge of attempting to reverse this

course and prepare all students, regardless of socioeconomic upbringing, race, or gender, with

the resources to succeed.

Summary

This section of the literature review provided a framework by which race and its effect on the educational experience of adult learners can be viewed. The research of Closson, 2010 allowed for a historical understanding of how adult education fits into the societal landscape of education from the early 20th century. Her work also encompassed intersectionality to support the early use of Critical Race Theory as a proponent for educational equity and equality. The literature of Johnson-Bailey (2001) examined how early publications acted as a critique of adult education's policies and practices concerning the African American experience. It exemplified how the African American scholars in adult education were able to amplify their message through their platforms. Even during intense racial segregation in the United States, Black scholars effectively used their collective voices to address challenges in the field and their communities.

Subsequently, culturally reflective pedagogy was incorporated to acknowledge cultural differences in the classroom. The intentional use of corrective action within the curriculum and pedological practices can help adult learners successfully navigate their institutions of learning (Thomas, 2003). Finally, Freire (1970) and the pedagogy of the oppressed was utilized as a basis by which educational institutions must challenge how educators transfer knowledge to their pupils. Institutions must understand that the traditional banking method does not allow students to bring their own experiences to the classroom, therefore undervaluing their expertise and abilities. The following section of the literature review incorporates Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory to support the relationship between race, andragogy, and educational achievement.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Urie Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Model* provides a relevant framework by which race, nontraditional status, and student outcomes are evaluated. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory examines how learners' environmental factors affect their personal growth and social development (Bronfenbrenner,1979). He uses five levels of external influence to exhibit how a child's cognitive development is involved personally to a systematic level. These five levels include:

(1) **Microsystems**: The closest environmental influence directly impacting the learner, the microsystem includes a learner's peers, family, the institution of learning, and the immediate community.

(2) **Mesosystems**: This level represents the interconnection between the various microsystems listed above.

(3) **Exosystems**: These systems encompass the places that indirectly influence a person's behavior. Examples include a learners' extended family and the greater institutional and living community.

(4) **Macrosystems**: The furthest space from an individual, but one that still directly and significantly influences a learner. This system is correlated with a person's culture, values, and beliefs.

(5) **Chronosystem**: These are the influences that change over time. Some contributions to this influence include an individual's living situation, employment changes, and economic changes.

Bronfenbrenner's research created a system through which developmental psychologists could examine the intricate relationship between a child, their environment, and how they

develop and grow (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1986), as cited in Burns, Warmbold-

Brann, and Zaslofsky (2015), stated that to understand the child, the environment in which the

child lives must be thoroughly examined, including the home, school, community, culture, and

so on (p.250). The Ecological Systems Model allowed Bronfenbrenner to develop a framework

for observing childhood development from a social context. Researchers began to use

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a lens to view the effects of poverty (Eamon,

2001), to analyze the effectiveness of instructional leadership (Smith, Hayes & Lyon, 2017), and

even to highlight the resiliency of young men in correctional facilities (Feinstein, Baartman,

Buboltz, Sonnichsen & Solomon, 2008). The ease in which Bronfenbrenner's model is used to

analyze a myriad of social phenomena is a testament to the fluidity in his work and the need for

research to understand a learner's situation holistically. This intentionally flexible model can be

applied to a broad set of conditions and provide more profound, more nuanced interpretations of

social phenomena (Burns, Warmbold-Brann & Zaslofsky, 2015).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model describes how a child's environment affects that child's

cognitive growth and outcomes. The model examines how the child's five different systems all

work interchangeably to influence the behavior and development of the child. Using a similar

approach to Bronfenbrenner but viewed from the lens of adult learners of color, this model can

be adapted to demonstrate adult learners' growth and social development. Figure 1 below,

Bronfenbrenner's original model, uses the five spheres of influence that impact individuals from

interpersonal to intrapersonal level. The figures exhibit the *nested system* or the direct

interconnection between all layers, representing the relationship through the intersecting arrows

that pass through each system on every level. Ultimately, the ecological system falls in line with

a broader theory of human development which believes that all forms of organizations that

incorporate the human experience are interconnected (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). To exhibit how

Bronfenbrenner's approach impacts the development of adult learners, the study will use a priori

coding method to demonstrate how the adult learners' experience coalesces with each system

within the larger ecosystem. The following section will delve further into each of the systems to

explain how the adult learner may navigate each environment.

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model
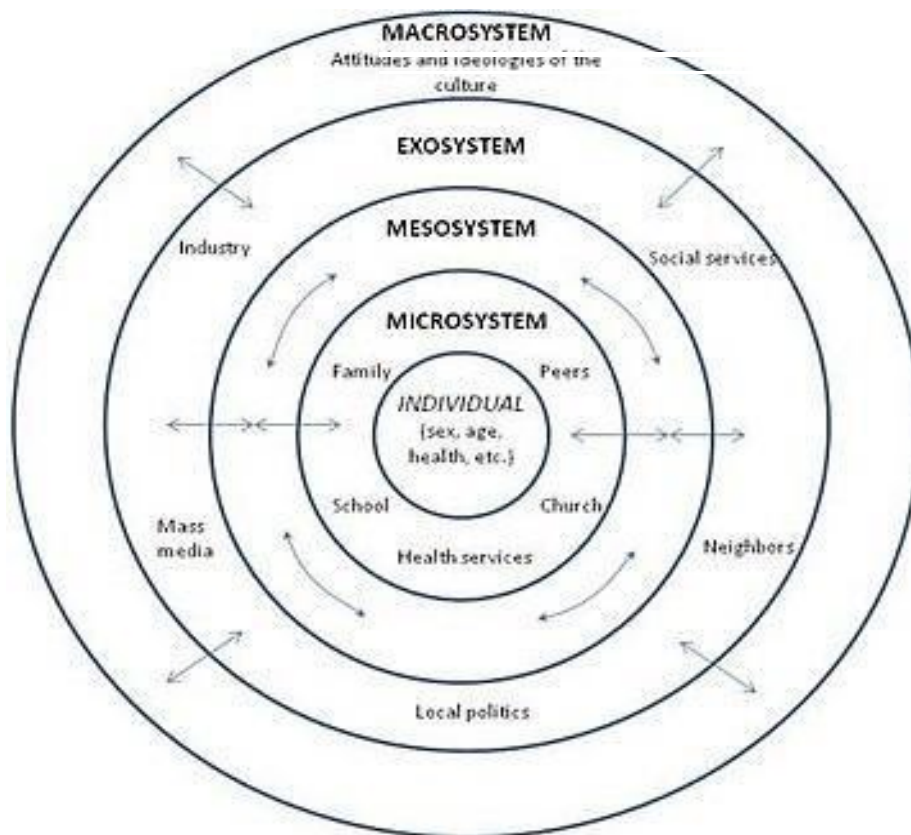
Note: Depiction of the ecology of human development by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

Microsystem Interactions

      This level of interaction shows the relationship between the nontraditional adult learner

and their most immediate environment. If interpreting associations through the eyes of NALs,

adult learners of color are directly influenced by the social interactions that exist within their

learning community and inside their homes. These influencing factors often include the learner's

significant other, children, peers, professors, mentors, and other influencers who engage with the

learner during their participation in the program. A students' professors, classmates, and support

network all shape the learners' academic and social growth in some fashion. Bronfenbrenner's

model exhibits this relationship using small arrows to indicate the connection between various

figures in a student's life. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System will assist in demonstrating the

linear way in which the learner's direct relationships create the most lasting and meaningful

impact.

Many researchers view the microsystem as paramount to developing a learner's behavior

and external outcomes. For instance, Seidman, Chesir-Teran, Friedman, Yoshikawa, and

Hirokauz (1999) conducted a study on depression rates of young adult learners. The researchers

examined how the subject's microsystem, specifically concerning the family and peer groups,

impacted their thoughts and feelings related to depression. A young adult with a strong, close-

knit network of support (microsystem level intervention) was less likely to suppress their

feelings, therefore less likely to fall into depression. Using this study to evaluate the relationship

between the learner and their micro-level system, learners of color may find support among their

immediate family and peer group or potentially fall victim to adverse outcomes. The institutions'

role is to create conditions that foster a strong relationship between the learner, peers, and

faculty.

Research by Renirie (2017) supports the claim that interpersonal relationships are

necessary for success among adult learners. In a study examining retention rates compared to

adult and traditional learners. Renirie stated that the relationship between faculty, academic staff,

cohort, and family was instrumental to the retention and eventual success of the adult learner.

Renirie (2017) stated,

> Relationships with their fellow students matter to adult learners, as well. Since the
> classroom is where adult learners focus their efforts, relationships with their peers factor
> into engagement and persistence (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Wyatt, 2011).
> Finally, family relationships are also critical to retention. For an adult learner to succeed,
> their family members often have to make sacrifices and provide support (money, time,
> energy). Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, (2011) found that while there was a general lack of
> encouragement from parents of the adult students in this study, help from their spouses
> and older children was crucial in the ability to remain in higher education; it was
> especially important for those adult students who were parents to small children. (p. 321-
> 322)

The excerpt above reiterates the importance microsystem level relationships have on the

academic and social development of nontraditional adult learners, illustrating the role that

relationships, both familial and educational, have on the adult learner's ability to manifest

success. Just as children need strong peer-to-peer relationships to engage in learning, adults have

very similar desires.

Beyond the support network, there is a sense of self-actualization that emerges from these

interpersonal connections. Adult learners become surrounded by people who encourage them to

succeed; then, they begin to internalize those beliefs. Moving forward, the ecological systems

that impact the learner on the subsequent levels become a little murkier, but the effects are the

same. Examining the impact of reentry programs on the Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chrono-level of

adult learners of color will help redefined the importance of institutional practices on student

success outcomes.

Mesosystems Interactions

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the mesosystem as the interconnection between the unique microsystems, furthering the learner's social, emotional, and academic development. Suppose a nontraditional learner is working a full-time job while also attending school and is an active member of a church during the weekend. Those two separate microsystems interact with the learner to create a mesosystem level intervention. The mesosystems are the cumulation of multiple sets of smaller micro-interactions. The role of the postsecondary reentry program is to act as a conduit between the interactions of two or more microsystems. Through the learners' various mesosystem connections, they could incorporate their lived experiences to support learning in the classroom.

An example of this idea is in Samuels, Beach, and Palmer's (2011) research, whose study discovered that an adult learner's lived experiences positively impacted their academic ability. Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) studied adult learners at a mid-sized rural institution that mainly catered to traditional learners, observing how adult learners in the class could draw tangible connections between their previous life experiences and their current academic objective. This transferal of experience comes from the multiple microsystem engagements throughout an adult learners' life that become the mesosystem. In figure 1, it is easy to determine where the micro and mesosystems overlap. These intersecting circles represent the exact point at which the converging microsystems connect to form the mesosystem. The institutions' influence is critical to developing a functional mesosystem because the institution acts as a meeting point between the microsystems.

Exosystems Interactions

Brofenbrenner (1986) provides insight into the role of the exosystem on childhood development by stating, "The psychological development of children in the family is affected not only by what happens in the other environments in which children spend their time but also by what occurs in the other settings in which their parents live their lives, especially in a place that children seldom enter—the parents' world of work" (p.723). Since many adult learners are often parents themselves, the exosystem level impact takes a slightly different view. The exosystem, specifically concerning nontraditional adult learners of color, is indirectly associated with the learner's progress. These intervening factors may include the learners' community, the greater institutional culture, or local policies and laws that impact the learner somehow. Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, and Davis (2011) conducted a study that addressed why nontraditional learners "stopped out" of school, and one main factor included the inability of students to access childcare opportunities. They stated, "Colleges might target this segment with creative ways to attend classes overcoming constraints of their family responsibilities. One way might be to provide cooperative child-care programs with parents/students acting as volunteers" (p.56). The excerpt above shows exosystem level interventions that could positively support the outcomes of learners.

An additional example of the profound connection between a learner and the exosystem is the institution's climate and culture. An article by Hampden-Thompson and Galindo (2017) stated:

> School climate, for example, the physical, academic, and social atmosphere that schools foster, has important influences on students, teachers, and families and has been observed by researchers for decades (Cohen et al. 2009; Epstein et al. 1997; Epstein 1991). Studies

have shown that school climate is related to all aspects of school life, including

leadership style, sense of community, expectations for students, an ethos of caring, and a

variety of students' outcomes (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy 2000; Gottfredson et al.

2005; National Research Council 2003; Sweetland & Hoy 2000). (p. 249)

Above is an example of how the exosystem works within educational environments. Even

though any one person does not manipulate institutional culture, it creates a tangible reaction that

is felt by all. For NALs of color, the perception surrounding the inclusivity of an institution can

often influence their academic and social experience. Postsecondary programs dedicated to the

inclusion of non-traditional student populations can benefit from creating a climate and culture

that supports student needs by developing policies that intervene on the exosystem level.

Macrosystems Interactions

Bronfenbrenner (1979) interpreted the macrosystem as a set of attitudes, behaviors,

ideologies, and norms that create the culture in which children must navigate. Moving from

Bronfenbrenner's observation of children to that of adult learners, NALs of color must also

grapple with the responsibility of navigating through these complex social environments while

also having a deeper critical consciousness of the world around them (Freire, 1973). Race and

class are two forces that significantly impact attitudes, beliefs, and norms (Bell, 1980; Johnson-

Bailey, 2006). Critical race theorists in adult learning (Closson, 2010; Johnson-Bailey, 2006;

Manglitz, 2003; Brookfield, 2003) viewed the race of the learner as an endemic aspect of the

learning process. Their race is critical to their lived experience as a learner of color; therefore,

racial identity would also impact students of color in some form or fashion. Closson (2010)

stated;

The potential power in CRT is its argument that in the U.S., racism is normative.

Accepting this as the starting point for the analysis of racism shifts racism scholarship toward

examining seemingly race-neutral laws, policies, social structures, and histories that may

continue to disadvantage persons of color. Moreover, CRT seeks explicitly to explain the

persistence of racism despite the considerable efforts in past decades to eradicate it.

Essentially, critical race theorists believe that anyone outside of the dominant societal group is an

unwilling victim of the systematic discriminatory policies embedded in the very fabric of the

nation's ideological framework. To effectively combat environmental influences, institutional

practices must be willing to create spaces for access and inclusion (Pittman, 1994). Effective

postsecondary reentry programs must be familiar with the variety of cultural pressures that

directly impact the learner and mitigate those pressures through strategic programming.

Postsecondary institutions have a micro-level impact on the learners' development, but

these institutions also have consequences on the macrosystem level. All postsecondary

educational institutions act as a medium through which societal attitudes, norms, and cultures

emerge (Anyon, 1980). In the worse of cases, learners from marginalized communities are likely

to experience educational settings and cultures that fail to adequately serve their academic and

emotional needs (Kozol, 1991; Schrag, 2003; Warren, 2005; Payne & Knowles 2009; Darling-

Hammond, 2006). In the very best of cases, institutions make it their priority to provide a system

of safety nets and support programs that ensure nontraditional students of color have all the

resources that they need to create a positive learning and social outcome (Chen, 2017; Erickson,

1968; Lakin, Mullane & Robinson, 2008).

The educational institutions' position on the Ecological Systems Model is strategic, partly

due to the learning environment's ability to create a steadying force throughout the student's life.

Postsecondary institutions support the development of intimate microsystems, connect multiple

microsystems through the mesosystem; lead to indirect psychological influences found in the exosystem; and act as purveyors of attitudes, values, and beliefs in the macrosystem. This delicate balance between the various ecological systems directly manipulates the learner's social, academic, and environmental development. Postsecondary institutions can positively or negatively act as the primary element that sways a learner's outcome.

Chronosystem Interactions

The chronosystem is a transitional system influenced by significant historical or life events that can alter and define an individual's lower-level systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For instance, a study by Hong and Espelage (2012) examined the family structure and its impact on childhood bullying. The study illustrated that most men who experienced bullying during childhood likely had an absent father as a pre-adolescent. Therefore, the significant chronosystem level event that impacted the child's susceptibility to bullying was the change in family structure during their pre-adolescent years.

Concerning the entire ecological systems model exhibited in Figure 1, the chronosystem does not have a designated ring. This system represents the larger environment that contains all the overlapping systems within it. This means that it is the furthest away from the individual in the middle of the model, yet it will still have one of the most significant effects on the course of an individuals' life. Just as Hong and Espelage (2012) demonstrated the ripple effect a chronosysytem event has on the future development of a child, this is evident in adult learners who can quickly become stuck in a perpetual state of misfortune, as exhibited in a research study by Yoshihama, Hammock, and Horoocks (2006).

Conclusion

The literature review shows that Critical Race Theory, the theory of andragogy, and

Brofrebrenner's Ecological Systems Model are windows through which educational attainment issues for adult learners are perceived. These theories help explain a small fraction of the phenomenon in question, and each theory faces substantial limitations in its ability to provide substantive solutions. For example, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is instrumental in explicitly addressing the inequities born out of society's inability to prevent race and racism from tainting our attitudes, beliefs, and systems. Unfortunately, CRT fails to provide an adequate solution that shows society how to fight these inequities. On the contrary, adult learning offers a slew of proposed solutions to differentiate education for adult students. Still, this theory lacks evidence-based research to lend credibility to the suggested solutions. There is some good to take away from the inclusion of these two theoretical perspectives. Each of the theories reaffirms the idea that nontraditional learners face an overabundance of barriers on their journeys towards academic success. The theories recognize the need to examine adult learners in a different light due to their status as people of color and adults in institutions that traditionally cater to a younger demographic. Lastly, each theory influences the ecological system of the learner at varying levels, which helps to identify how the social, environmental, and academic development of nontraditional learners of color are affected.

Although initially applied towards examining childhood development to one's environment, Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model can be replicated using the social environment of adults. Reimagining the ecological system as a fluid-structure that can adapt and evolve to fit the environmental conditions of any person, regardless of age, race, or economic background is essential to broadening the models' scope of influence.

Unexpectedly, race and the student's learning environment are a relevant part of the individuals Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chrono-level systems. This impact is in the students'

narratives overserved in the case study. The review of literature, specifically the work of critical scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, deliberately expresses how race and racially discriminatory practices infiltrate every part of our society. Our laws, policies, systems, and institutions reinforce ideas of supremacy and privilege for those inside the margins. Therefore, if adult learners of color seek to reenter postsecondary institutions, they must find an environment committed to their success and wellbeing.

Chapter Three: Methods & Procedures

An in-depth examination of a single case study will provide insight into the experiences of nontraditional students of color to better understand how participation in a designated reentry program has affected the student's academic and social development. Due to the use of multiple subjects and stories to explore and observe the phenomenon and its impact on the student, the research will utilize an instrumental case study approach that will provide insight into the phenomenon of the postsecondary reentry program. (Stake, 1995). Case studies are "useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural, real-life context" (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011). This research study answers questions about the program's influence on the outcomes of nontraditional learners of color, so it is best to use an approach that will help the researcher gain a deeper level of insight into the subjects' lived experiences. The objective is to bring life to the phenomenon so that anyone can relate to the data.

Case Selection

The study will explore personal narratives of adult learners of color currently enrolled in a local university's reentry program. These individuals come from various backgrounds and lived experiences, but their stories intersect with their enrollment in one regional university. This university has a total population of 9,000, with 72% of the student body identifying as White and 28% being students of color. The institution also boasts a first-generation student population of 48%, with most comprised of in-state residents. A case study consisting of student interviews, artifacts, and observations will determine themes inferred from the participant's responses in the

study. The narratives gathered will provide insight into the lived experiences of the NALs of color and their perception of the program's effectiveness. It will also determine whether participating in the program increased the NALs academic and social outcomes. Qualitative research is subjective by nature; therefore, researchers are encouraged to use subjectivity and to seek new insights while remaining mindful of the mental blocks that this subjectivity creates. Qualitative research must also consider social context, regardless of the motivation and goals of the researcher. Failure to do so will undermine the study's validity and misrepresent the results (Bamford, 2011). It is essential to ensure that participants' backgrounds, academic abilities, and sentiment towards education are all fully considered during the selection process to encourage intra-group diversity. Additional actions will help standardize the process, which is done through secondary observers or formal gatekeepers during the individual interview phase. It is also essential to consider that much of the data collection must occur in informal settings due to our non-traditional student population schedules.

Research Site

The research site for this study is a postsecondary reentry program housed within a midwestern university. The program's website states that its mission is to "increase access to postsecondary education for nontraditional adult learners' experiencing socioeconomic challenges, facilitates admissions to the university using holistic model, and retains admitted students by providing a wide range of support, opportunities, advocacy, and resources." The program has been in existence for 20 years and has served thousands of non-traditional learners since its conception. In its early history, the program served at-risk, non-traditional women of color, specifically. The program has broadened its scope and allows non-traditional adult learners from all walks of life to participate in the program. Currently, the program has an enrollment of

85 students, 26 of which are first-year participants. Students range in age from 25-67, with an

average age of 41. Female students represent 84% of the programs' population, and 50% of the

student population identifies as African American/Black.

Data Collection

Subjects for the study are selected using a formal gatekeeper. This gatekeeper is directly

associated with the reentry program and will help establish a connection to the group. Formal

gatekeepers are essential because they allow the researcher to build trust among the community,

especially when entering close-knit communities (Hatch, 2002). The gatekeeper will then

introduce the researcher to the program participants who meet the criteria for this study and

formally communicate the research objective to those eligible participants. Participants who

agree to assist in the investigation will have their identities concealed. Hiding the subject's

identity will ensure anonymity among the student and the administrators in the building. This

selection process would be considered a homogenous grouping. Homogenously selecting

participants for a case study allows the research to choose a set of individuals with certain

similarities (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, other data collection methods such as semi-

structured interviews and artifact collection related to the program will be gathered and evaluated

for this study.

Interviews

Participant interviews are the primary sources of data for this study. Interviews are an

essential component of many qualitative studies because they allow researchers to study people's

views of their lived world (Kvale,1996). This data will give a detailed description of the lived

experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in the reentry program while allowing for

triangulation of information through the additional sources of data gathered through this study.

Transcripts gathered through the interviews were shared with the participants to confirm understandings of their statements.

The study interviewed seven students and one administrator. Participant interviews took place between September 8, 2020, and October 10, 2020. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used to inform this study. The detailed information gathered from the study's participants was used to answer the research questions directly. These participants will become key informants for this study by providing first-hand knowledge of their experiences and providing a greater understanding of the perspectives and motivations (USAID, 1996).

All participant interviews were audio-recorded and digital software was used to categorize and transcribe the individual interviews. For a participant to successfully qualify for this study, a subject must match three of the identifying characteristics to be eligible for participation. First, this individual must be considered a "non-traditional" learner or someone who did not enroll in a postsecondary institution directly after completing high school. Specific characteristics associated with nontraditional learners were provided in chapter one. Second, participants must identify as a person of color.

For this study, a person of color is anyone who is of non-White or Caucasian descent. Students of middle eastern descent are categorized as people of color in this study. Lastly, eligible participants must be current students or recent reentry program graduates. The program was chosen for its direct access to non-traditional students of color and the extensive wrap-around services. This program will give a glimpse into the institution's role in support at-risk learning populations and could potentially set a standard for other universities to follow. The population of students we intend to study is the most vulnerable in enrollment and degree completion rates, so the information gathered during the investigation will potentially prescribe a

set of solutions to support this growing demographic of learners.

Once the gatekeeper appropriately identified subjects, interviews were conducted at the start of the fall semester. The discussions included a brief introduction of the research objective and aim of the study, followed by the signing of a written consent form that allowed the interviewee to withdraw at any time. Each interview lasted approximately 30 – 55 minutes, with a few participants contacted to clarify their statements. All participant interviews took place using virtual conferencing technology.

An initial series of questions were assigned to delve into the student's socioeconomic background, general view of education, career aspirations, and reasons for participating in this specific reentry program. These questions sought to describe the participants' motivations for pursuing higher education to determine if there is a connection between the student's decision to enroll in the program and subsequent career aspirations and whether the learners' social-environmental outlook changed participating in this program. The second set of questions turned towards the institutions themselves to examine how the program supports their development. These questions focused on the participants' experience as learners of color in the designated reentry program, the effectiveness of the institution's academic and support services, and how the program has impacted the learner both personally and professionally (see Appendix A). Finally, the interviews were transcribed and arranged using *In Vivo* and *A Priori* coding.

Artifacts

The artifacts and documents gathered included the program's annual report data that illustrates program demographic data, missions, recruitment plan, retention data, and a host of other insights related to the reentry program. Other artifacts used in this study described how the institution selects participants for the reentry program and provides an overview of course

curricula used during the first-year college readiness course that all learners in the program must attend. Other documents will include program brochures, information from the program's website that provides additional insight into services offered, social media accounts associated with the program, and YouTube video testimonials recorded that highlight student stories. These documents provided reference material to determine how the reentry program supports its student population more accurately.

Historical diversity demographic data will assist in examining whether students of color are gaining access to these programs. Student majors and concentrations help understand what career outcomes are expected for student participants. Student matriculation data capture whether students of color successfully graduate from this reentry program. All the artifacts assisted in successfully determining what the school has done to integrate their nontraditional learners of color on campus. Website information that addresses the program structure and classroom curricula, which highlights the rigor and overall quality of the program's educational component, will be evaluated as well. Stake (1995) viewed documents and artifacts as a substitute for records and activities that the researcher cannot directly observe. With limited time available to complete in-person observation, documents and artifacts are used as an additional form of evidence that will bolster the strength of the research.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing data requires the researcher to take a vast amount of information and make sense of it all. This study will use *In Vivo* coding to create themes from the transcribed interviews. Saldaña (2013) describes *In vivo* coding as "literal" or "verbatim" coding where a long text is deduced into short statements. Strauss (1987), as cited in Saldaña (2013), explained this process of coding as short phrases or words that assign meaning to

language-based data. In essence, the purpose of coding is to create sense from the chaos. The research will sift through interviews and field observation transcripts through two cycles. The first cycle will use *In vivo* coding, meaning the living world and *attribute* coding. Attribute coding will allow the researcher to quickly identify the participants in the study by categorizing their age, major, race, and undergraduate level. This method is needed to quickly sort through participant information and make accurate connections later in the study. Afterward, in-vivo coding, which comes from the grounded theory or theory rooted in original data (Saldaña, 2013), will summarize the participants' own words and deciphers them into smaller parts. It is effective because the researcher avoids misinterpretation of the data.

After the first cycle of coding is complete, researchers will conduct a second cycle of *a priori* coding. A priori coding involves developing codes aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Weber (1990), as cited in Stemler (2001), stated,

> When dealing with a priori coding, the categories are established prior to the analysis based upon some theory. Professional colleagues agree on the categories, and the coding is applied to the data. Revisions are made as necessary, and the categories are tightened up to the point that maximizes mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (P. 3).

Using this approach will allow the researcher to utilize a preconfigured coding scheme to analyze the data explored in the interview into categories created through the theoretical framework. This coding system allows for a more precise association between the interview transcripts and the general sentiment of all observed participants. This approach will help researchers better understand the phenomenon and connect it to the theoretical framework. Lastly, code weaving integrates the words and themes to create a narrative that summarizes the participants' experiences. This final step provides a concise interpretation that successfully ties together all the

codes into a group of salient themes.

To protect the participants' confidentiality during the data analysis process, each interviewee was randomly assigned a number from 1 to 7 and given a pseudonym. Their pseudonym and the corresponding chart in Table 2 were used to help tell each participant's story. A priori coding method was used to predetermine themes and help guide the interviews' questions. This coding method is ideal for the study because Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is a tool to construct the questions and create predetermined themes using those questions. Then, participant responses to the questions were coded for secondary themes, and probing questions helped provide more context to the phenomenon. Although a priori coding allowed us to identify the significant themes before beginning the interview process, emergent themes started to appear, and relevant subcategories provided more nuance to the data.

Research Timeline

Research protocols were established to ensure that interview data were reviewed accurately and promptly. The steps included:

1. Receive permission from the host site to interview students in the program

2. Conduct and record interviews with student participants

3. Transcribe interview data

4. Analyze artifacts and internal data related to program

5. Conduct member check

6. Organize results using the A priori method

The research timeline is an overview of the steps taken to formulate and organize the data collection process. This information reflects the procedures discussed at length earlier in the data collection and data analysis sections of chapter 3.

Establishing Validity

Validity was established through methodological triangulation to strengthen the accuracy of the study. Methodological triangulation is the process of using multiple forms of data-gathering techniques to nullify potential outliers in the data (Stake, 1995). Interviews, virtual observations, and artifacts helped to support the findings and increase the legitimacy of the data. The data gathered has been cycled through multiple levels of coding, establishing more salient themes in the process. This coding process will ultimately provide the researcher with substantive information to strengthen understandings of the phenomenon and to enable recommendations for future action. The richness of the descriptive text will also bolster the overall body of research. In addition, the study utilized *member checking* to ensure that the investigator maintains high standards of efficacy. Member checking adds a layer of transparency and accuracy to the research study. Member checking involved the periodic sharing of results and/or data with participants to allow them to check for validity and resonance. The technique will enable participants to add more clarity to their experience if they believe that their words were not succinctly depicted (Brit, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016, Crestwell, 2005)

Role of the Researcher

I am the child of a nontraditional adult learner of color. Unfortunately, my mother was unable to complete her studies, but even so, she continued to stress the value and importance of education in the lives of my siblings and me. Her belief in creating a better life through education led me to work in college access. I eventually started an organization to support nontraditional students of color on their journey towards reentering postsecondary institutions. My current research is based on my personal experience and is the reason behind the need to share the unique stories of other adult learners from marginalized communities.

Ultimately, my role as the researcher is to act as an intermediary between the subject's narrative and the participating institution. I am here to observe the experience of nontraditional students of color in a way that is not biased nor intended to sway the opinion of my subjects intentionally. I must also be willing to embrace my role as an objective observer of their lived experience. Within my past experiences, I know and understand the issues that nontraditional learners of color face on their journey towards creating a better future. Still, it is not in my best interest to use this case study to display my personal feelings associated with the program. It is an opportunity to highlight those personally impacted who experience these challenges every day. The goal is to learn about potential solutions that will challenge institutions to look critically at their current policies and practice concerning the academic, social, and career growth of nontraditional learners of color. We must be willing to toss out our preconceived notion of how education is traditionally done and encourage others in our professions to consider the impact of race and inequity on systems and outcomes.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is related to the use of one institution for the analysis. Since there are very few designated reentry programs for adult learners in this region, the research is limited in its ability to emphasize a wide variety of experiences and stories. Fortunately, the institution at the center of this study is a part of a dedicated department within a larger university committed to supporting this population of learners, which will provide unique insight into the programs and services that adult learners receive. The selection of this program was due to its long history of student support and proven outcomes related to student success. Multiple students from various reentry programs could have been included in this study, but the idea was to narrow the scope while probing deeper into the stories

of the students.

An additional limitation is in the method used to collect data. Case studies emphasize gaining an in-depth understanding of a situation, which allows for flexibility in the way narratives are compiled and captures the reality of an individual's lived experience. Yet, student interviews provide a limited account of a situation. The insight gained from an interview relies on how much, or how little, a participant is willing to share. It is also time restrictive due to the amount of data that a researcher must transcribe and the limited amount of time available to effectively review and interpret the data. Other forms of data will help support the findings through triangulation to offset any potential issues. This process will assist in validating the findings and ensure the accuracy of the results.

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the procedure and methods related to this study, identifying insight into the research design processes used to analyze and gathered participant data. Examining the research site, data collection processes, and the instruments used to analyze the data will ensure the study's validity and efficacy. The specific methods and procedures addressed, and the information detailed above, justifies the selection of an instrumental case study design. It also proposes the researcher's technique for ensuring data security, participant privacy, and general trustworthiness of the interview process. Lastly, chapter 3 provides insight into some of the limitations of this study to illustrate the narrowly focused range of depth the study intends to have.

In chapter 4, the results will be presented based on the data collection and analysis. Participant testimonies gathered from the semi-structured interviews will feature the experiences of nontraditional learners of color. Finally, chapter 5 will discuss the findings of the results,

formulate conclusions based on the information observed, examined the implications of the study

for practices, and help the researchers make recommendations for future studies.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how nontraditional learners of color are affected by their enrollment in a reentry program. Consequently, the first-hand experiences of seven student participants, all categorized as nontraditional students of color, were explored to determine what contributed to their social, behavioral, and academic outcomes. The rationale behind using this hermeneutic approach was to capture the real-life interactions between the learner and their institution. The following research questions guided this study: (1) What are the lived experiences of nontraditional adult learners of color enrolled in a postsecondary reentry program? (2) How does the institution influence the academic and social development of nontraditional adult learners?

The research findings reported in this chapter are based on the analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students, a virtual information session with the program director, and artifacts related to the program's annual report. In addition, the course curriculum, program websites, and social media accounts were examined. In total, seven student interviews, one administrator interview, and thirty pages of relevant documents helped describe the history of the reentry program, recruitment and retention efforts, support services provided, and understanding the varied experiences of nontraditional learners of color enrolled in this program. Direct participant quotes gathered from the in-person interviews enabled deeper probing into the themes. Finally, the findings answered the two main research questions related to this study. Using a priori coding and emergent coding, the research generated several themes aligned closely to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Description of Interview Participants

The eight participants interviewed for this study – seven students and one administrator - are a part of a postsecondary reentry program at a university located in a midwestern state. The participants ranged in age from 30 to 63 years old and were at varying stages of their educational journeys. The racial/ethnic make-up of the participants varied, with one participant of Middle Eastern descent, one of Hispanic descent, and five identifying as African American/Black. Of the seven students, two were men, and five were women; six of the seven have children or other dependents at home, while only two of the seven are married—all but one participant held at least a full-time or part-time job while attending school. Pseudonyms helped identify the participants -- Debra, Jessica, Mary, Malik, Janice, Paul, and Kim.

The program administrator, referred to as Linda, contributed critical understandings about the history and relative scope of the reentry program. She provided insight into student recruitment, the support services offered, and the overall mission of the reentry program. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of participant gender, age, race, academic majors, work status, and graduation year. In addition, Table 2 shows the percentage of enrollment for the entire program by age, race, and gender.

Table 2

Participant description by gender, age, race, academic major, work status, and graduation year

Participants	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Academic Major	Work Status	Graduation Year
01 - Debra	F	63	African American	Social Work	Retired	2022
02 - Jessica	F	55	African American	Behavorial Science	FT	2020
03 - Mary	F	50	African American	Art	FT	2021
04 - Malik	M	36	Middle Eastern	Education	FT	2020
05 - Janice	F	35	Mexican/Polish	Communications	PT	2020
06 - Paul	M	38	African American	Psychology	FT	2019
07 - Kim	F	30	African American	Intregrated Studies	FT	2022

Note. Pseudonyms was used to protect participant identities.

Figure 2

Reentry program demographic data

Age: Students range in age from 25-67 with an average age of 41; 62% of students are

in their 30s or 40s

Gender: 84% identify as female

16% identify as male

Race: 50% identify as African American/Black

30% identify as Caucasian/White

9% identify as Hispanic/Latino

9% identify as Middle Eastern

Note. The information below reflects demographic data for the Fall 2018 academic semester.

Figure 2 above gives an overview of the demographic information for all the

nontraditional students enrolled in the program for the Fall 2018 academic semester. This chart

provides general insight into the large population of students who identify as students of color.

Figure 3 below illustrates a code-to theory process to connect the actual and observed interview

data to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and used as a lens through which the

narratives are explored. The interview data collected allowed the researcher to provide context

behind how the ecological systems of the learners have been affected by their participation in the

designated reentry program and creating categories that align with salient themes associated with

Ecological Systems Theory.

Figure 3

A Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry.
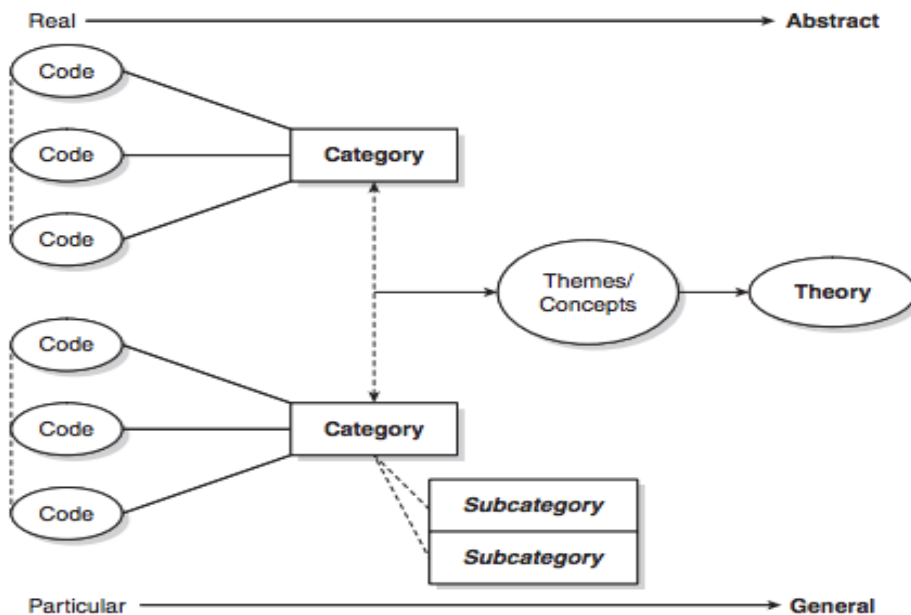
Note. Used to illustrate how codes and theories were developed. (Saldaña, 2016)

The seven participant interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length, providing

varying levels of insight into the interviewees' experiences. Initial questions were asked to

participants. Later, probing questions helped extract a deeper understanding of the learner's

experience in the program. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded to

assess emergent themes. Importantly, all interviewees' opinions, beliefs, and voices were heard and accurately captured in the study using the process of member checking to ensure validity and transparency.

Study Findings

The findings gathered helped highlight the importance of direct connections, specifically related to peers, program administration, and family members, on the nontraditional learner of color's actual and perceived outcomes. In addition, the findings suggest that the learners held the institution and postsecondary reentry program in high regard and viewed the program as an integral factor in their academic and social success. It was determined that the learner's social environment, race, and upbringing also contributed to their overall beliefs associated with their educational experience.

The figure below summarizes how the five broad themes fit Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model. This figure shows the multidirectional relationship between the systems and how each approach cannot exist without the other. It acts as a symbolic representation of how the participants' environments influence their academic, professional, and social development. As stated in Chapter 3, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to develop a set of primary questions that align with elements of Bronfenbrenner's five ecological systems. Those questions helped construct the overarching themes shown below, while the subthemes represent emergent codes that surfaced from the direct participant responses to the primary questions and probing questions.

Figure 4

Ecosystem model with five broad themes
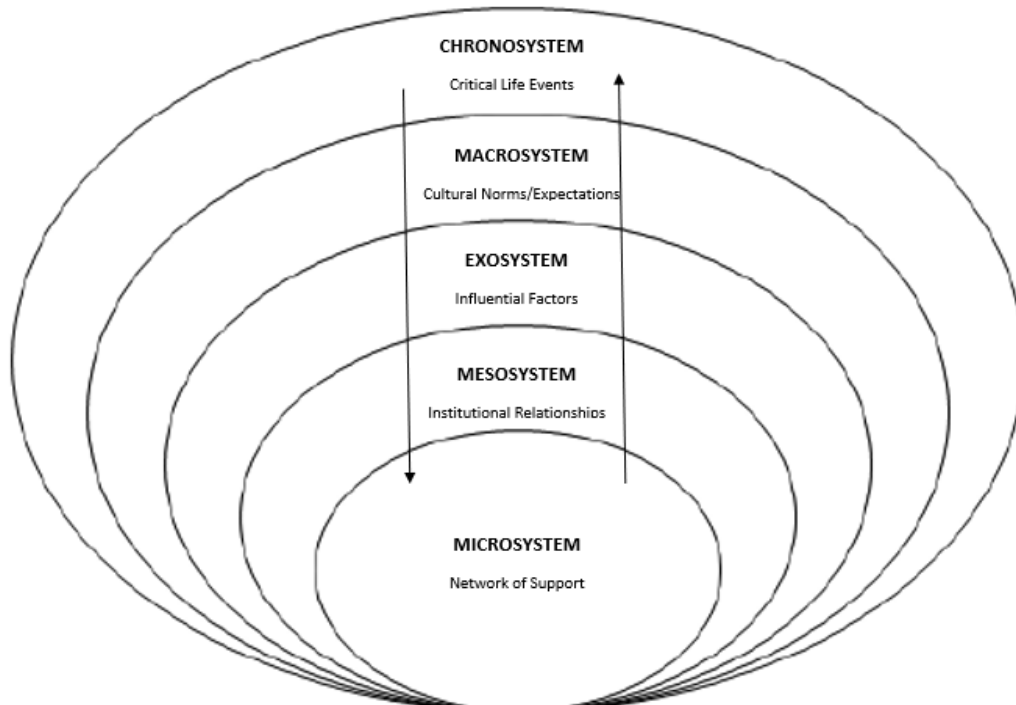
Note. This model illustrates Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory with the five major themes of this study reflected in the spheres.

In the sections to follow, the five themes shown in figure 4 were examined through the separate lens of each of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems. This approached exemplifies the impact that reentry programs had on specific levels of the nontraditional learner's environment. Subsequently, in Chapter Five, the interconnected relationships between the five broad themes are examined in more detail.

Theme 1: Network of Support

A priori coding assisted in developing a predetermined set of questions that explored the notion of support systems and how they helped the learners along their postsecondary

educational journeys. For this question, participants touted the role that interpersonal connections and relationships played in their overall sense of community and educational experience as participants in the postsecondary reentry program. Words such as *community*, *family*, and *support system* were used to express how they managed to navigate their educational environments. These relationships included the support of spouses, children, peer groups, and personal connections that opened the door for them to enroll in the program.

Personal relationships were regarded as the most valuable form of engagement for each of our participants. The importance of relationships was discussed when "Jessica" stated, "It was like a family setting…we were able to mesh, and we understood that we were in support of each other, accomplishing our goals." Jessica's quote emphasizes the importance of community and family and its impact on achieving success. In Jessica's view, the reentry program saw each member of the learning community supporting each other to attain their goals. Another participant, Malik, also described the familial environment. "Malik" stated, "They're [program staff] like family, you know. They always listen and hear me out." This statement reflects the consensus among the students interviewed in this study. Family, community and interpersonal relationship building were essential for these students. In addition to the relevance of relationship and community, there were additional emergent codes drawn from the interviews that helped to inform the sub-themes, which included: (a) recruitment through a network, (b) family support, and (c) strong relationship with program administrators.

Subtheme 1a recruitment through a network. Interviewees were asked about their introduction to the reentry program. Many of the students learned about the reentry program through word of mouth or targeted recruitment efforts from the institution itself. After a deep exploration of artifacts collected from the reentry program, it was clear that the institution's

recruitment strategy was centered on forming relationships within community colleges and in the community to spread awareness about the reentry program. According to the program's annual report, recruitment into the program occurs through "relationship building with local community colleges, human service organizations via the annual community partner luncheon" (Annual program report, 2019). This intentional relationship building on the community college level is integral to the program's recruitment efforts, specifically seeing that all the participants came directly from community colleges. The impact of these relationships on the recruitment process can be witnessed through our participants' responses. "Mary" went on to state:

> We had this one event at the community college, and there was a lady from the reentry program there. As I took the paper, I was like, 'oh, that sounds cool' because everything matched up…she says, 'I'm actually on the board of the program.' So, she reached out to the program director and talked to her [about Mary]…it skated me in. It got me right in.

The woman Mary met at the community college fair began to build a relationship with her, reaching out to her throughout the semester and eventually helping her secure a spot in the program. Other participants expressed similar experiences regarding their introduction to the program. Janice's mother was a nontraditional learner enrolled in the program before Janice joining. Since her mother was already an established student at the school, it made Janice's decision to attend more straightforward. On the other hand, Debra was introduced to the reentry program by a classmate at the community college she attended before enrolling in the four-year institution. Her classmate referred Debra to the program the semester before graduating from community college, and she was able to register the following year successfully. For others, this encounter was a relatively simple process. "Paul" stated,

> I decided to go back to school after my son was born, and I always wanted to go here

because it was closer to home…I met with the directors that day, and from there, I just

signed up that day. I ended up being accepted to the program, and the rest is history.

Regardless of the extenuating circumstances related to the situation, each of the seven

interviewees relied on some form of direct connection or personal network to gain access to the

reentry program. These personal connections became a broker of information and a trusted

resource that pushed the learner towards accessing this educational opportunity. Historically,

social capital, or the resources, contacts, and opportunities afforded to those in the dominant

class, were difficult for people of color and other marginalized people to obtain (Martin, 2012).

Ironically, the primary beneficiaries of social capital have been the students least likely to benefit

from their connections in a traditional educational setting.

Subtheme 1 b family support. Participants discussed the support provided by members

of their respective households or community. Regardless of the frequency, family support was an

essential part of their emotional and academic outcomes. It became apparent that some

participants received more support from their families than others. Still, overall, everyone

described having a grounded system of support to help them persevere through the difficult

moments. The participants and their family members became intertwined within their respective

educational journey, and sacrifices were required from everyone involved in this process. The

excerpts from the interviews reflect a strengthening of bonds between the learner and their

respective families and, more importantly, a common belief in the learner's academic success.

"Mary" stated, "I have seven grandkids, and they keep me motivated… my kids are my rah-rah

team." In describing the encouragement he received from his family, "Malik" stated, "I would

have to say my family is pretty supportive…they ask me about my classes and how school's

going."

Additionally, another participant described her mother, a former member of the reentry program, as the most significant support. "Janice" stated, "I don't know what I would have done without my mom's support. I have had so much help from her, and I still do." She later described how her mother helped take care of her child when she was busy with school. "Janice" stated, "I had so much help from my mom, and I still do. She was able to pick them up from school and drop them off at their sporting events."

The brief excerpts exemplify the commitment that many family members made to their loved ones, whether providing moral support or stepping in as a co-parent. Their various implicit and explicit support helped the participant navigate the challenging postsecondary environment. Others in the program had to motivate themselves to get through this journey intrinsically. Participant "Jessica" discussed the lack of support by stating, "This was a decision that I made...support or no support, I knew that it would be for the betterment of my life and my son. But there was not a whole lot of support at all." In this instance, Jessica's family members generally acknowledged her educational endeavor, but no one gave her any tangible assistance, financially or otherwise. Jessica knew that the onus was on her to complete her education on her terms, and no one would be able to motivate her more than herself. Furthermore, she wanted to use this moment to set a positive example for her son and encourage him to set high standards for himself.

Subtheme 1 c strong relationship with program administrators. When asked about the relationship participants have had with the program administrators and staff, the word *supportive* was frequently used to describe their experience. The participants all shared positive sentiments when addressing their relationship with the program's administration, and this relationship was perceived as genuine and reciprocal. "Malik" stated, "I just felt like when I was

part of the program, I had a supporter. Sometimes I'll go through some issues or struggles, and I know that at least I can go talk with them." Additional responses were shared that reiterated similar beliefs as Malik. For instance, participant "Kim" described the two program administrators as a "listening ear." When supporting learners with last-minute tasks, Kim stated, "They are very understanding. I gave them a nine-page paper and asked, 'Can you review this? I need to submit it by tomorrow. They weren't happy, but they did it." Administrators who directly interacted with the participants supported students in a way that resembled a family-like relationship. The participants expressed much adoration for the program administrators, emphasizing administrative support as a critical component to their positive academic outcomes. The connections forged within the learner's household, the greater community, and the educational community was necessary to the favorable association that NALs of color had for their experience in the reentry program. If continued success for the reentry program is desired, they must continue to educate their adult learners using this same approach.

Overview of Theme 1

Theme one, and the following subthemes generated in this section, stemmed from the use of an a priori coding approach to developing inductive codes based on a set of predetermined questions that closely connected to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model presented earlier. The first set of questions sought to learn about the interpersonal relationships that each participant used to help them navigate their environment, replicating the learner's microsystem interactions. From there, additional subthemes naturally emerged from participant responses, and probing questions were used to garner more profound insight into how the learner's relationships supported their educational experience. Common words such as *community*, *family,* and *support system* began to surface from the interviews, describing the beliefs and experiences of the

interviewees. Ultimately, the questions used to develop theme one - a *network of support* – were sustained through the subthemes exploring, specifically, how the learner's interpersonal relationships were integral to their academic and social outcomes. Hence, providing relevant insights into how microsystem level interactions have impacted the learners in this study.

Theme 2: Institutional Relationships and Impact on Learner

A second predetermined set of questions were asked to participants to gain insight into how relationships on the institutional level affected the outcomes of nontraditional learners of color. During this questioning, the topics that participants discussed and corroborated through artifact analysis all related to the synergy created between the reentry program and the university. From the data explored, these relationships helped minimize the external barriers that participants faced during their educational journeys while also providing the participants with necessary academic support. Based on the participants' responses to the initial set of questions, probing questions were then asked to explore further underlying themes emerging from the interviews. The artifacts and interview data collected provided deeper awareness of how institutional relationships influence nontraditional learners of color. The sub-themes that emerged included (a) relationship between institution and reentry program, (b) relationship between community college and four-year university, and (c) relationship between faculty and peers.

Subtheme 2 a relationship between the university and the reentry program. A common theme that surfaced from the initial line of questioning and artifacts gathered pertained to the strength of the university's relationship with the reentry program. To better understand how the university supports the reentry program, it was critical to examine the artifacts related to the program's operations. Utilizing information found on the institutions' website, annual report

information, and student testimonials, the relationship between the university and the reentry program is uncovered. One of the more essential interactions between the program and the university relates to allocating resources to fund academic and financial support services. Many participants described the cost of education as an enormous barrier for all students, regardless of age. Still, nontraditional learners of color often qualify for fewer government loans, take on more debt, and lack general knowledge about financial aid. "Janice" stated,

> I think people of color have more of those financial barriers. And I think that's the resounding issue, and in how that affects us when we're growing up, when we're moving through the world, when we are coming back to school as nontraditional students. I think that one of the common elements is that a lot of students of color have financial problems and barriers that other students usually don't have.

Another participant, "Jessica," explained how she made a significant financial sacrifice to focus her efforts on achieving the whole college experience.

> I ended up cashing out my 401K after the first year because – or six months somewhere around there – and saying to myself, you know, if I'm going to have a full college experience. So, I worked periodically for the same company from time to time, but mostly I went to school, and I did. I maxed out my financial aid.

Jessica made an enormous financial sacrifice in the hope of capitalizing on the full college experience. She wanted to experience college how her traditional counterparts had the chance to do. Like Jessica, other interviewees highlighted the financial losses due to pursuing education, whether in student loans or reduction in job hours. Fortunately, the reentry programs assisted in minimizing many of the financial barriers students faced.

The role of the university and the reentry program is to ensure that financial support is

provided to all nontraditional learners in need so that the financial barriers that prevent them

from completing their degree are eased. Along with additional university donors, the institution

supports the program by providing funding to students in various ways. Below is a list of some

of the financial supports that are offered to NALs enrolled in the reentry program:

- Program Scholar Funding: Seven students received funding totaling $20,823. The

  funding provides financial support for students beyond the first year with a minimum 2.5

  GPA and not enough grant or scholarship aid to cover and fees. This support is available

  fall and winter terms to qualified students through 96 credits completed.

- NAL Program Specific Scholarships: This scholarship provided all students with 6,850

  dollars of tuition support.

- Additional Scholarships: Students earned over 15,000 dollars of additional internal and

  external scholarship support in 2018-2019.

- G2G funding: Approximately 7,000 dollars provided from the *Get to Graduation Fund*

  enabled five students to graduate who would not have been able to do so in 2018-2019.

- Textbook Loan: Fund expenditures totaled 8,824 dollars.

- Technology Loan: Four new laptops and peripherals were purchased at 3,274 dollars. A

  gift of 10,000 dollars was received in October and will be primarily used for new laptop

  purchases. The account balance ending May 31, 2019, was 10,883.64 dollars.

- Student Support Fund: The Student Support Fund provides critical assistance to students

  experiencing an unexpected financial need during the semester. By meeting those needs,

  students can continue making timely progress toward graduation. The account balance

  ending May 31, 2019, was 4470.37 dollars. (Annual program report, June 15, 2019)

Along with the financial supports notated above, the university also assists with academic

intervention for students in the reentry program. These educational support resources include:

- Mandatory enrollment in the 'Academic Renewal for Returning Adult Learners' course

- Laptop loan program

- Textbook loan program

- Tutoring services

- Access to student mentors, exam prep, online course navigation, and research assistance
  (Annual program report, June 15, 2019)

The following participant quote from "Jessica" will help illustrate the personal impact that these resources have on the academic experience of nontraditional learners of color.

> They're not going to sit and do the work for you. But they do give you all the support
> and referrals that you need to get the help, the tutoring, but you got to do the
> work…definitely. But the support system is there. I mean, if anything, you've got
> students that were anywhere from history to engineering to social work, psychology
> majors, and we all needed some type of help during that journey. She gave us whatever
> support we needed to get through whatever classes….the support was really valuable.

The support from the administration and university to provide appropriate resources for learners was referenced thirty-two times throughout the interviews. As observed in the artifact above, the institution provides all students with $6,850 in tuition support upon enrolling in the program. Without the university and the reentry program working collaboratively to deliver some form of financial and academic relief, nontraditional students of color would continue to remain susceptible to adverse outcomes.

Subtheme 2b relationship between community college and four-year institutions.

The program administrator acknowledged the connection between the reentry program and local

community colleges as a tool to recruit students into the program. According to the annual report provided by the program director, one of the recruitment strategies involves relationship building with community colleges and hosting admissions transfer informational sessions at local two-year institutions. This relationship is reflected in the sheer volume of nontraditional learners currently enrolled in the reentry program with an associate degree (91%) from one of the regional two-year colleges in the area. Additionally, one of the stipulations for entry into the program is for applicants to have at least 24 transferrable credits, meaning that students would have had to complete two years of education at a previous institution to qualify.

Many of the students reported facing a perceived challenge was the belief their community college experience did not adequately prepare them for the rigor of a four-year institution. This very sentiment was addressed in-depth during the participant interviews. Participant "Paul" stated,

> Community college was a breeze. It was like high school. The university was a lot more academically driven. The standards were higher, they were much higher, and things that you could breeze by with it the community college won't fly at the university. That was, I think, the biggest change. You had to be on point with your paper writing; you had to be on point with your attendance. The instructors at community college are there as a secondary job, whereas most university instructors are there as a primary job. So, their only job is to make sure that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing. I think that was a big difference. They were a bit more serious academically.

Paul believed that his community college experience lacked rigor and seriousness, especially when considering their objective is to prepare learners for the next level in their education. Similarly, "Kim" described her community college experience as "easy" and that she had no

issues balancing multiple classes and a full-time job. Whereas, when Kim moved to the

university level, she felt a higher standard to uphold and often felt overwhelmed and unsure of

her abilities. Participant "Debra" viewed her community college experience as a "nice stepping

stone," but ultimately, she did not feel prepared for the university level. None of the seven

participants interviewed in the study felt that their community college education thoroughly

prepared them for their experience at the 4-year level. The students' interaction with community

colleges is not a slight to those institutions or to disparage its rigor. These quotes demonstrate the

need for more support during the transition process from community college to the university

level. Additional insight regarding this matter is provided in Chapter Five. This subtheme may

represent a potential area of improvement for nontraditional learners transitioning into a four-

year university and is a considerably integral step in the positive outcomes of these learners.

   Subtheme 2c relationship with faculty and peers. Interactions between professors and

peers in the classroom setting can enhance or disrupt the experience of adult learners. One of the

interview questions asked about critical incidents between the learner and their professors and

critical incidents between the learner and their peers. Each of these two questions sought to delve

further into the lived experiences of the nontraditional learner and how those experiences

impacted the learner's outcomes. For the most part, the students' experiences with professors in

the classroom were mixed. Participant "Mary" had a favorable view of her professors and

viewed them as "understanding" and often "lenient" to nontraditional students. She went on to

say, "I found a lot of professors very understanding. They still try to keep it straight across the

board, but if given enough reason… knowing that I'm not trying to slack…I get that pass to

maybe get another try or turn it in a little bit later." Mary suggests that some of her professors

show characteristics of care when interacting with her in the classroom. This feeling of care

could be the professor's general manner when working with students. Still, Mary felt that her nontraditional status played a significant role in the additional support she received. Other students were able to form a mentor-mentee relationship with their professors of color. For instance, Paul spoke of two professors he formed quick bonds with during his time as a student. He recalled a moment where he and his professor, an African American Studies instructor, spent time talking about historical events in African American history. Since he was one of the oldest students in the class, he brought a richness of context to the conversation that his traditional counterparts could not understand. This relationship led to the professor inviting Paul to guest lecture in a class the following semester. "Paul" described his experience with his professor and the guest lecture opportunity as "amazing" and was appreciative of the rapport he had with his professor.

Regarding interactions between the nontraditional learners and younger, less experienced classmates, there was a general sense that the participants interviewed in this study did not have the time to forge bonds with their classmates due to the everyday business of life. Some of the participants expressed having a lack of time, which prevented them from developing relationships with younger learners in the class. "Kim" stated, "I don't think I'm very active. I think it's me because pre-pandemic, I would come in, run to class, and I'll be late getting in there, and when it's time to go, I leave." When Paul answered the same question about his interaction with the traditional students in his class, he echoed Kim's response. "Paul" states, "I would say no. And the only reason is because I didn't talk to anyone; I think it had everything to do with the availability. I will go to class, and I will go home. I didn't spend much time on campus other than in the office and in my classroom." The consensus gathered from the interviews suggests that nontraditional learners must prioritize relationships in their personal and

academic life due to the other obligations in their lives. Since many of the learners have children

and other dependents in the household, there is insufficient time to build strong relationships

with classmates who do not relate to them.

Overview of Theme 2

As discussed in the overview for theme one, theme two was developed from a similar set

of predetermined questions that explored the impact that a series of relationships have on the

learner's outcomes. The exploration of these relationships expanded from the interpersonal, as

witnessed in theme one, to the intrapersonal, consisting of the relationship between separate

actors and its subsequent impact on the individual's life. This theme represents the role that the

mesosystem plays in the development of the learner. The mesosystems are interpreted as

cumulating multiple sets of smaller micro-interactions, which further the environmental and

academic development of the learner. With that stated, programmatic support must provide

comprehensive assistance to the learner on the social-emotional level.

The set of questions that formed theme one led to developing a few emergent subthemes

that examined the depth of intrapersonal relationships that somehow influence the learner's

outcomes. These subthemes explored the relationship between the university and the program,

the role that community colleges have in the students' educational experience, and the interaction

between faculty, peers, and the participants. In part, this theme consists of elements that align

with aspects of Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, serving as a unique framework through which

these relationships can be analyzed.

Theme 3: Influential Factors

For the pre-coded theme three, a series of questions were developed to understand the

various influential factors that impacted the participant's attitudes and behavior around their

education. Some of their answers referenced their work experience, skills developed throughout the maturation of their lives, and the culture of support embedded in the program itself. These influential occurrences, both internally and externally motivated, changed how participants in their study processed their education and ultimately shaped their perception of learning. The emergent subthemes that surfaced from the interviews included: (a) Life experiences and (b) academic support systems. The data gathered through the following interview excerpts and artifacts will showcase how influential factors that impacted the participants became a critical component of their academic and social outcomes in the reentry program.

Subtheme 3 a life experience. When asked about influences that impacted their educational background, many participants pointed to their age and what that brings to the classroom during their learning experience. Nontraditional students have amassed knowledge and situational understanding through the greatest teacher – life. In many cases, they have lived through events taught in history books. Their work experience has allowed them to employ a deeper understanding and practical application to the classroom setting. Their additional obligations outside of the school setting had allowed them to develop time management skills.

The external environments that nontraditional learners are required to navigate have strengthened their resolve in many instances—allowing them to pull from past life situations to support their goal of pursuing their degree. The following participant testimonies will highlight the relevance of life experiences for nontraditional learners in the classroom. Participant "Jessica" stated, "I was coming in as a mature individual and with the understanding that I had quite a bit of life experience and quite a bit of experience as a professional. I'm just here to enhance my education and get my degree…coming in with life experience helped a great deal." Jessica explicitly states that her life experience was a true benefit for her in the classroom setting,

but, in Jessica's opinion, she was not worried about anything but the task at hand – completing her education.

When asked about being a nontraditional learner and the experience he brings into the classroom, "Paul" stated, "I think the biggest difference I realized in coming back as a nontraditional student is a rapport with the instructors where we were not peers because they were my instructor, but we were as far as our ages and the same generation. So, it was a less authoritarian on their part for me." In Paul's statement, his age and unique life experience strengthen his connection with other older adults, including professors.

Other experiences, such as interactions with family or children, create events that shape individuals on a much deeper level. Debra described how attending a Catholic middle school made her value education differently, academically putting her ahead of many of her high school and college peers. Malik also discussed how his failed attempt at starting a business made him reconsider going back to school. Each interviewee's experience in life led them to seek out and enroll in this reentry program. Now, these same life experiences are helping them navigate this educational terrain.

Subtheme 3b academic support systems. As questions probed deeper into the influences on student outcomes, artifacts and interview data from the program's director gave more insight into factors influential to the participant's educational experience. One significant impact on the development of nontraditional learners enrolled in the reentry program is the academic support systems put in place for the learners. Upon entering the reentry program, each nontraditional student is provided a set of learning objectives intended to shape their academic outcomes. These outcomes are used as a support mechanism to develop and access educational and social goals. Based on the artifact regarding learning outcomes, students should:

- learn to successfully navigate university systems

- identify and utilize resources and opportunities to enrich their academic experience

- improve reading, writing, note-taking, and exam preparation strategies

- become adept at using technology to access and communicate information

- enhance communication skills to foster productive relationships with faculty and peers

- acquire relevant leadership skills

- seek out peer, faculty, staff, and community mentors to build a community of support

- set realistic goals for academic progress toward degree completion

- develop a post-graduation career and/or additional education plan (Annual program report, June 15, 2019)

The program's advisory board developed these objectives above to ensure that all students who enter the program will thrive within the educational setting and beyond. These objectives, used by the program as a measurement for student success, are there to guide students through their educational journey. They are then required to meet with their program advisor to ensure these objectives are met. Additional examples of social support are in the interview with Linda, the program director for the reentry program. Participant "Linda" describes the various ways in which she attempts to create a community of support for her nontraditional learners. She stated,

It starts with communicating with one another. And then we always meet with the students individually, of course, throughout the whole process of becoming admitted. But then we always follow up…We introduce students to faculty in their areas of study. We look for high-impact practices to connect them with. We look for ways to potentially connect them with other entities on campus that they might want to become involved with, like women and learning and leadership.

As suggested above, the program administration developed a set of methods, such as one-on-one advising, referrals to on-campus support programs, and professor-faculty engagement

opportunities, to socially and academically support their student population in a way that is

authentic and meaningful. Linda describes that efforts that take place on the programmatic level

that positively drive outcomes. "Linda" then stated,

> We're there just to support the student, so a lot of students come in, and they use
>
> all of our resources, and they see my program assistant, they see us a
>
> lot…Whatever level of connection you want, we're there to fill a gap. We have a
>
> list of program outcomes that we want for the students. We go over those
>
> outcomes with the student when they first start with us, and then we make sure
>
> that we meet with them at least a couple of times a semester or have a phone call,
>
> a semester for those students who are coming into space regularly.

The comment captured above suggests that the support these students received was directly

linked to the efforts set forth by the program administration and advisory board. "Linda"

explicitly stated that the intent was to "fill a gap" and ensure that students meet the program

outcomes, ultimately leading to their graduation from the university. Early on, the program

administration committed to supporting their students in specific ways, and now the students are

beneficiaries of the program's commitment to providing adequate and appropriate support

services.

The myriad of life experiences that NALs bring to the classroom, coupled with the

reentry programs' willingness to create support systems, provides opportunities for learners to

obtain academic success. The participants were able to use influential moments of growth within

their life journey to support their academic learning. At the same time, the program

administrators inside the reentry program created a high set of educational and social standards

that strengthened student engagement and forced students to motivate themselves to succeed

fervently.

Overview Theme 3

Theme 3 centered on understanding the indirect influences on participant behavior, attitudes, and academic outcomes. Primary questions for this theme were developed with Bronfenbrenner's exosystem in mind. This theme moves from the individual learner's inter and intrapersonal relationships in the classroom and the home to the larger systems that influence the learner indirectly and that the adult learner subconsciously brings along with them. Through the interview analysis and artifact collection process, major subthemes related to life experiences that learners unknowingly bring to the classroom and the external social support systems created on the learner's behalf were significant to the participants, as witnessed in the direct participant quotes above. The emergence of these subthemes emphasizes the role that external factors have on the outcomes of the participants.

Theme 4: Cultural Norms and Expectation of Self

Theme four sought to explore the role of cultural norms and self-expectations on the participants. Participants expounded upon the topic to identify specific subthemes that emphasized culture and self-expectations. The emerging subthemes referenced the culture of the academy and feelings of academic inferiority. Some of the students felt they were ill-equipped for the academic culture that is entirely different from what they experience in their community. Direct participant quotes explored the effect of adjusting to academia's culture and understanding the student regarding their culture, identity, the systems in which they learn, and how they view themselves within that system. Two of the prominent sub-themes explored through student interviews are (a) navigating academia - language and culture, and (b) personal motivation. Each of the sub-themes will be examined to understand how the outcomes of the participants are

affected.

Sub-theme 4a navigating academia--language and culture. When discussing race in the classroom, a common belief of *inferiority* began to emerge. A few of the interviewees acknowledged that many nontraditional students entering the classroom feel inferior because of their age, the number of years they have been away from the school, or not completely understanding the academic language and culture. Janice touched on this topic when discussing advice she would give to other nontraditional students. "Janice" stated, "You're going to make mistakes…don't let yourself feel inferior, because I think that that comes up a lot…it's going to be hard…and some of the professors are going to be difficult to work with. It's hard work, but you'll get through it as long as you have a positive attitude." When pressed to elaborate further on the idea of inferiority and specific instances where she may have viewed herself as "inferior" to others, "Janice" responded, *"*A lot of professors and academics use a lot of jargon… it's part of their language. I think in some ways, for nontraditional students of color, we're not used to talking like that if we don't come from an academic background…I think that academic language is a barrier for non-traditional students of color. And it can be intimidating when they first come back to school." Her direct quote highlights the importance of language in exacerbating educational inequity, especially for marginalized student groups.

Recall that the concept of macro discourse concludes that education is built on language that is foreign to students of color (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). Traditional academic structures reinforce specific standards of language which students are required to conform to with little regard for the students 'own culture and language. Additionally, research by Gee (2004) surmised failure to acquire and incorporate academic language could prevent students from minority communities from accessing societal power. The academic language used in the

classroom is often at odds with the home language of these students, which can propagate

cultural barriers and prevent nontraditional students of color from achieving success. In Janice's

case, nontraditional students of color who have not been exposed to the language and culture of

academia may find it difficult to adjust to this system. Mary provided a somewhat similar

statement, but in her case, she decided to use a different method to help her adapt to her new

environment. "Mary" stated,

> Well, it's intimidating because not only am I a nontraditional student, and a woman of
>
> color…also my age. So, a lot of times, when I was going to classrooms, and a lot of the
>
> young men were Caucasian; they just had smart written on their foreheads. They were
>
> younger than me, highly technical, so what I did to help my own anxiety of feeling
>
> inadequate in this type of situation, I try to befriend them. I figured you guys could
>
> probably teach me.

In this instance, Mary felt that she could overcome her perceived feelings of inadequacy by

joining peer groups made up of younger White males. She believed that allying with her White

counterparts could help her succeed academically. On the other hand, Paul and Jessica took a

different approach towards navigating this new academic culture. They purposefully sought out

and built relationships with Black professors who could provide them with needed guidance and

mentorship. Below, participant "Paul" described his interactions with a Black professor. He

stated,

> She [the professor] taught African American studies. She is *amazing* [emphasis added].
>
> We spent a lot of time in there just talking. She asked me to teach in her class for the
>
> semester right before I graduated… I was probably one of the oldest students in the class,
>
> so when she would talk about historical events in African American history, I was

already knowledgeable about those things. I've been studying those things myself, so we

had a bit of a rapport.

As the Black learners began to build relationships with Black faculty members, they noticed that the university lacked a general presence of diversity within classrooms. Those Black professors who wanted to support their Black students often outwardly had to mask their support to remain impartial. Jessica, who had a few Black professors she had built relationships with, vocalized this sentiment. "Jessica" went on to state,

Their support was silent. It had been so unfortunate; you know what I'm saying? It had to

be behind closed doors. It had to be…where they support not just us but the entire class,

which is great and the way it's supposed to be, but it was always in silence. You knew

that everything had to be done behind closed doors. So, are there enough black

professors? Not at all.

Too often, this remains the case for faculty members of color. There is a line that must be toed-in order to avoid the belief of favoritism. The unwritten rules surrounding the language and culture of academia prevent many people of color from finding their voices and community within predominately White cultures. Janice, Mary, Jessica, and Paul could all feel that the higher education system failed to make space for them, so they each found a way to carve out their own.

Sub-theme 4b personal motivation. All the interviewees described their motivation for pursuing higher education. Most participants suggested that their motivation for enrolling into the reentry program was done for intrinsic purposes, whether that is their faith in God, achieving a goal, being an example for their children, and not necessarily pursuing financial security a job title. The following testimonies will examine the personal motivations of a few of our interview subjects. Participant "Kim" stated,

> I have to say, my faith in God keeps me grounded and sometimes just getting away from things. Like getting off social media, like detoxing [from social media], really helps me get centered. And reading the bible and praying, it helps me just stay grounded because there's just so much going on, and it helped me to finish school because sometimes, I just be like, 'I don't feel like doing this,' but it keeps me grounded. It keeps me going.

Kim relied heavily on her faith to keep her grounded throughout her educational endeavor. She talked extensively about her religion and reading the bible to clear her mind. Her faith was used as a mechanism to push through difficult circumstances.

In the following quote, Jessica describes the importance of accomplishing a goal despite the obstacles she faced in her life. "Jessica" stated, "I went back to school at 50 years old. That's not easy…It really showed me that I had the determination to meet my goals, so going back to school was not just about having a freaking piece of paper on the wall. It had to do with me needing a goal and accomplishing that." Jessica had experienced many highs and lows in her life. Now that she has completed her bachelor's degree and has accomplished her first goal, she now feels that she must set the next destination for her educational career, completing a master's degree. The following excerpt provides insight into the personal motivations of "Malik." He stated, "I felt it was more like I wanted to prove to myself that I can do it. .. and also, I want it to

be a good role model for my kids because I have to because I want to show them that I can do it,

even though the system was set up for me to fail." When referencing the system being set-up for

him to fail, Malik is describing the impact of being an ethnic and religious minority and dealing

with the societal challenges it entails. In addition, Malik used his children as inspiration for

completing his education. Throughout the interview, he described coming from a cultural

background where men do not pursue higher education, especially teaching. This was his

opportunity to set an example for his children and to himself that he can chart a new path.

The final excerpt from participant "Paul" describes the expectations that he wanted to set

for his son as the motivation to graduate from college:

> My wife and I want to set a good example for my son. We want to set a foundation. You
>
> know, every generation kind of does better as far as education goes or should be striving
>
> to do so. So, we wanted to set the foundation at least having a bachelor's degree is where
>
> you should start and go up from there…that was pretty much the impetus for both of us
>
> going back to school.

The excerpts shown were a few examples of the motivating factors for adult learners of color.

They are pursuing this endeavor for their families, for a better future for themselves, and often,

for the chance to accomplish a goal in their lives. It is critical to remember that the attitudes,

beliefs, customs, and norms that shape our culture are reflected in the images that we hold of

ourselves. Nontraditional students of color must silence the doubt in their heads created by the

expectations society places on them and learn to draw upon the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators

that keep them pushing forward towards their goals.

Overview Theme 4

Theme four was generated with Bronfenbrenner's macro system in mind. The central

questions developed to gain perspective into culture, values, and beliefs that shape the outcomes and experiences of each participant. The findings suggest that some of the participants struggled with navigating the culture of the academy, causing thoughts of inferiority and inadequacy among the participants. The participants expressed the continued reliance on motivators to achieve their goals – touting family members and personal accountability as critical reasons for persevering through challenging situations.

The quotes used in the subthemes affirmed the role that beliefs and culture have in student success. When the participants referenced feelings of inferiority and the inability to immerse themselves in the academic culture fully, they began to internalize those thoughts, causing some to struggle with adjusting academically. Conversely, when the participants found motivation in intrinsic or extrinsic factors, they expressed a desire to complete their education to achieve their goals. In this case, the NALs of color must navigate a foreign academic culture while grappling with personal beliefs that can encourage or dissuade success.

Theme 5: Critical Life Events

The questions in this theme explored the large-scale, life-altering events that have shaped the participants' view of the world in some way, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Chronosystem. These critical events created a seismic shift within the personal lives of a few of our participants, ultimately affecting their view of education and impacting their social and academic outcomes. The subsequent subthemes that emerged from interviewees relate directly to (a) race and identity and (b) life-changing events.

Sub-theme 5 a race and identity. When asked about critical events that shaped the participant's life and ensuing view of education, many interviewees described incidents involving race, racism, or identity and the challenges it created for some of them. Being a student comes with various difficulties for anyone navigating higher education. Still, by adding the complexity of age, race, ethnicity, and religion, one can find oneself cast to the far margins of society. The following excerpt illustrates the impact that the learners' identity has had on their educational experience. "Malik" stated,

> I had an issue with one of the teachers. She made us read this book… I think it was called Brokeback Mountain, and I didn't enjoy that because the book was very detailed on some of the things that the guys were doing. I told her that I was uncomfortable reading the book. She kind of just looked at me…She didn't really, you know, respond to me the way I hoped she would respond because I was trying to explain to her a lot of people that attend the school are Middle Eastern or Muslim, and this is something that is strongly forbidden.

In this situation, Malik's religious perspective was at odds with the content taught in the course. His religious faith opposes particular life views, and his professor was not aware of the cultural differences that impact his life on a chronosystem level. Instead of using this moment to learn about the cultural differences that exist in the classroom, the conversation ended in judgment.

The following testimony describes how Jessica felt that her race caused her to be treated differently in class. "Jessica" stated,

> I had the class with a professor, and he was just such a rude person. I looked at him, and I'd be raising my hand, and he just would never call on me. I would have questions, and it was like I was invisible. He didn't even see me. On the other hand, it was this little blonde White boy over here who was a premedical major, and every time he would direct his

attention to him…for a black student to be passed over like that and the whole class knew

it, you just know.

Jessica perceived her professor's lack of engagement to be directly associated with her race. Her

experience as a Black woman who has dealt with racism in America justified that assumption.

Lastly, Paul provides insight into how his experience attending a Historically Black College and

attending a predominately White institution has shaped his overall perspective. "Paul" stated,

It's very strange being at this particular school. I started at a Historically Black College or

University (HBCU), so it was a big difference between that education and my current

education. But also, because I was older, I wasn't going to be active in a lot of the black

student union stuff. What I know, I mean, there is a lot of prejudice on that campus. And

I had a couple of incidents of, I won't call it blatant racism, but prejudice due to the way I

present myself and how I present myself as a person of color. I don't think that was

affected at all in the reentry program, but at the university, generally, it was a couple of

instances with a couple of students, no professors, but a couple of students.

Paul did not explicitly address the specific situation he had with the students. Still, this experience highlighted a more significant issue of prejudice that he and other nontraditional students of color have faced at the university level. One's race, ethnicity, gender, and identity will continue to impact one's view of the world, so institutions must create equitable and inclusive environments that encourage diversity and community acceptance.

Sub-theme 5 b life-changing events. Some events are so important that they can impact the trajectory of a person's life forever. While probing deeper into questions about critical life incidents, a few of the interviewees shared events that significantly impacted their lives, leading them to change their lives and pursue education. For Jessica, when asked about her attitudes and beliefs about education and its importance, she opened up about a personal situation she dealt with as a young adult. "Jessica" stated,

> I was a drug addict for 20 years. You will never be able to understand what it feels like to turn your life around after being on drugs; you can't. So, that is what makes me valuable as a person, but the educational system tells me that I'm not, even with that experience, worthy of the money until I have the education, so I have to play the game.

Jessica's addiction, and subsequent recovery, created a life-altering moment that changed her perception of the world around her. Fortunately, after going through her journey, she decided to use her experience to help others. However, she still felt undervalued by her society and in her career because she lacked formal education.

Malik described a critical incident that shaped his education journey. "Malik" went on to state,

> To be honest, I've had a very rough year. I moved down south, but when I was down there, I lost my brother. I then opened the business that we were actually supposed to run

together, but I had no idea what I was doing, so when I did open the business, I ended up

failing, and that was when the crisis started to happen. Then I moved back home. It was

just all failure after failure…I can't find work because I don't have a degree. My life is so

much harder now because of that. That was like one of the biggest motivations that made

me want to get a degree.

Malik faced a lot of turmoil, causing him to return home and restart his life. The death of his

brother was a cataclysmic life event that eventually led him to pursue education and enter the

reentry program. It can be inferred from the conversation that the loss of his brother had changed

his social ecosystems on all levels. He has now begun to use his education and career in teaching

to reshape his life. Lastly, participant "Debra" described the importance of education in her life,

and her response detailed a transformational life event. She stated,

Even after my grandmother stopped working for them…they [grandmother's employers]

put me in Catholic school, and I learned so much more than what was being taught in a

public school. When I got to high school, the [employer's] mother had died, so it was up

to my mother to pay for it. She paid for the first year, and after that, she said she couldn't

afford to pay for it anymore, so she put me back in a public school. I thought they were

so stupid. I couldn't understand how I got set back…because what I had already learned

in those few years at the Catholic school, they didn't even touch on it, even at the 12th

grade.

Debra's experience around race and class were not too common, especially as a Black child in

the 1960's. She had privileges that other Black children her age and, in her city, rarely had. For

her, high-quality education was something that she had come to expect. It was not until she was

placed back into a public school that she noticed the educational inequities between the

communities. Each of the participant excerpts above, in a unique way, examines the role of the influential life events on the social and educational development of the nontraditional learner. Their age created more opportunities for prior life events to shape their current worldview. However, regardless of the situation, each individual still views educational access and achievement as an essential part of their lives.

Overview Theme 5

The final theme sought to understand how life-changing events acted as a change catalyst for our participants. The thematic set of questions given to the participants were aligned with Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem to know how these transitional occurrences altered the course of the participant's lives. As the participants began to delve deeper into their personal stories, it was evident that race and identity, as well as important life events, in some way shaped the perceptions that each participant held of education. The examples above represented a few of the obstacles that some participants experience in their lives. Still, it is essential to emphasize that chronosystem-level events can also be positive experiences. For instance, Paul described how the birth of his first child led him to pursue an education to set an example for his son. Other participants discussed the impact that spirituality and religion had on their lives. Just as adverse circumstances shape one's life, the same is true for positive life events.

Summary

The research questions were answered by triangulating data collected from the interviews and artifacts. The first research question asked about the lived experiences of nontraditional adult learners of color enrolled in the postsecondary reentry program. The emergence of the multiple themes and subthemes supported the idea that the students' lived experiences are varied. Many factors have contributed to a student's success in the postsecondary reentry program. It was also

observed that nontraditional students of color relied heavily on the support of their learning community. Whether this is a unique cultural phenomenon or related to the learners' age group, the community was integral to the participants' acclimation into the program. In short, all five themes had a marginal impact on the learner's educational experiences in some form or fashion, but the three most relevant themes to research question one were themes 3, 4, and 5. Each theme provided a detailed glimpse into their lives as students within the school and their environments.

The second series of research questions were related to the institution's influence on the academic and social development of nontraditional adult learners of color. Answers to this question were found in themes one and two: (a) network of support and (b) institutional relationships and their impact on learners. The emergent sub-themes pulled from the major themes described the specific institutional and programmatic support systems that played an essential role in the academic and social development of the nontraditional learners in this study.

Ultimately, this research suggests that student success is a culmination of multiple factors, including personal character (motivation, view of self, agency) and institutional supports (academic tutoring, scholarships, social supports). The adult learners overwhelmingly alluded to the belief that their external environments played a crucial role in their overall development as students. They provided detailed descriptions of how their life experiences, relationships with family, and personal challenges affected their educational and social outcomes. Fortunately, the reentry program effectively supported nontraditional learners as they sought to overcome the barriers preventing them from finding success. Chapter Five will provide a series of policy recommendations, underline the limitations of the current study while addressing potential areas of exploration for future research and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study, to emphasize again, was to understand how nontraditional learners of color are affected by their enrollment in a reentry program. For this instrumental case study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, artifacts related to student enrollment, demographic data, and publicly available information regarding the program provided insight into the experiences of nontraditional learners of color enrolled in the reentry program. The following chapter will discuss the findings from Chapter Four. Subsequently, this chapter provides potential recommendations for other post-secondary institutions interested in supporting their underrepresented adult learning population.

To reiterate, the two main questions that this research study sought to answer were the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional adult learners of color enrolled in a postsecondary reentry program?

2. How does the institution influence the academic and social development of nontraditional adult learners?

The following sections will give a high-level overview of the findings from the participant interviews, examine the interconnection between Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model and the themes generated in Chapter Four, and provide a series of policy recommendations for universities seeking to establish postsecondary reentry programs. Lastly, the study will conclude by presenting proposals for future research that will allow additional scholars to explore this phenomenon in ways not covered in this study.

Discussion

As the number of adult learners enrolling in colleges and universities across the country

continues to rise—around 6.6 million adult learners as of 2018 (Gross, 2018)—institutions must

remain flexible in their ability to support the unique academic and social needs of these students.

Institutions must be mindful of the multitude of complex milieus, relationships, and experiences

that the adult learner brings into the classrooms and use their resources (financial, programmatic,

and academic) to support the transition of older adults into their learning communities. Adult

learners, often possess a great set of challenges that make their transition more complex, often

attempting to support full-time jobs, maintain their families, and balance competing obligations

that minimize their focus on the classroom. Therefore, universities must help alleviate some of

the barriers that prevent adult learners from maximizing their full potential.

The result of this study implies that the implementation of a specially designed reentry

program geared towards the adult learning population could positively aid in the successful

transition of adult learners back into higher education. As stated in previous chapters, reentry

programs are a viable response to the shifting labor force, where adults, attempting to meet the

needs of a more educated, globalized workforce, have begun to flock as they seek to make

themselves more employable (Rosser-Mims, Palmer & Harroff, 2014). Unfortunately, minimal

research has been conducted that explicitly addresses reentry programs not focused on formerly

incarcerated individuals. The student quotes used in Chapter Four assisted in highlighting the

positive associations that the reentry program had on adult learners, specifically concerning the

assuagement of academic and financial barriers that negatively affect the students' decision to

pursue or complete their education after enrolling.

An additional area that could benefit from greater insight into the educational support of

nontraditional students of color is the need for more diversity among faculty members. In the study, students explicitly stated the need for more representation of faculty of color. This reasoning was that marginalized students felt a profound sense of support from faculty who shared cultural or racial identity. A shared understanding of language and culture between the learner and professor allowed the learner to bring their authentic selves into the classroom, challenging race and power dynamics. In addition, one participant expressed how his Black professor's curriculum was reflective of the knowledge that he gained as a Black man, making it easier for him to connect with the instruction. Research by Turner, González, and Wood (2008) described the importance of cultivating substantial faculty diversity and its role in advancing faculty of color. The study determined that tokenism and a lack of student/faculty diversity and of diversity recruitment and retention efforts have combined to produce negative experiences for faculty of color. Subsequently, elements of Critical Race Theory will provide insight into the culture of academe, which is centered on Whiteness and frequently viewed as uninviting to adult learners of color.

Interactions Across the Ecosystems

The findings from Chapter Four compellingly suggest that the participants in this study were adequately supported across all dimensions of their social ecosystems. As shown in Figure 3, the themes paralleled Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model while also exhibiting how the systems interact as a singular entity. And as indicated in the study, each participant was influenced by various relationships, both institutional and familial, and through the systems, beliefs, attitudes, and overarching experience the learner had to navigate. These relationships shaped the experience that these participants had with the postsecondary reentry program, for better or worse. Fortunately, the common belief was that the reentry program did provide a

sanctuary for students reentering academia for the first time in many years. The reentry program

was able to assist with easing the barriers to access and achievement through financial assistance,

academic support, and the formation of a close community of support.

To fully explore the impact of the reentry program on nontraditional learners of color in

this program and understand the role of the learner's environment on their educational outcomes,

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model was incorporated to categorize the themes captured

in Chapter Four. It is also relevant to note that although the themes were assigned to a specific

ecosystem in the previous chapter, there is an overarching interconnection between all the

themes and Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem model. The following sections will explore the

overlapping relationship between the postsecondary reentry program and Bronfenbrenner's

Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chronosystem levels.

Interactions Across Microsystem

By examining Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, family and peer groups are considered the

most fundamental social institution through which children view the world (Paat, 2013). In the

context mentioned above, Paat explored social institutions from a child's perspective, but a

similar case can be made for nontraditional learners of color. Although the context has shifted

slightly, and the age of the learners is markedly different, Bronfenbrenner's model was

fundamentally sound in its interpretation of direct relationships and its impact on the

development of students. Participants in this study all acknowledged, in some form, that family,

nontraditional peer groups, and administrators were integral to their sense of community and

overall academic success. The learners also recognized that they relied more heavily on their

direct support networks because of their nontraditional status. Extra support systems were often

required to navigate this new educational terrain efficaciously. The relationships formed within

the nontraditional learner's microsystem ultimately defined how they perceived their educational experience.

All the themes in Chapter Four have elements of microsystem level interactions that shaped the students' educational experience. Four of the themes, particularly theme 1 (network of support), theme 2 (institutional relationships), theme 3 (influential factors), and theme 5 (critical life events), explored how individuals, both internal to the program and externally related to the learner, used their relationship with the participant to influence them along their respective journeys. These influences included added motivation, direct academic support, or a gatekeeper to the reentry program. Regardless of how the themes paired in the study, personal relationships developed through the reentry program itself or from an existing relationship formed outside of the classroom all contributed to the student's experience and directly linked back to the microsystem level.

In Theme 5, Jessica described an incident with her professor that she believed was due to her race. She described how one professor would never acknowledge her in the classroom, and he would even avoid looking at her when she tried to answer questions. This microsystem level interaction between Jessica and her professor impacted her view of the institution, leading her to question her belonging at the university. Another example of microsystem level impacts was evident in the experience of Janice, when she discussed the role that her mother played in supporting her throughout her educational journey. Janice's mother filled in as a surrogate parent to Janice's children, picking them up from school and driving them to and from sporting events to ensure that Janice could make it to her classes. If it were not for Janice's strong personal network of support, she would have had difficulty pursuing her education while balancing her external obligations.

Interactions Across Mesosystem

The mesosystem is a system of relationships consisting of two or more microsystems (Bronfenfrenner, 1979). For clarity, the relationship between a child's parent and the teacher would be considered a mesosystem level interaction. For this study, the themes that directly aligned with Bronfenbrenner's definition of a mesosystem relationship were theme 2 (institutional relationship and impact on learner), theme 3 (influential factors), theme 4 (cultural norms and expectations of self), and theme 5 (critical life events). The link between mesosystem lies within the interaction between the multiple layers of microsystems that directly influence students. These layers expand from institutional supports to the more significant societal inferences molded by an individual's community, racial and ethnic group, age, or economic status.

The findings suggest that the partnerships and complex mesosystem level interactions were all fundamental to the educational experiences of the nontraditional students who were enrolled. These partnerships ranged from direct relationship building with their professors and peers to more student study rooms and office hours that required students to interact with others in the program on varying levels. Regarding the reentry program, a study by O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) suggests that a successful higher education experience for adult learners consists of a two-way process of change and development between the institution and students. The study determines that institutions have the challenge of creating environments that include programs, policies, and initiatives that assist in the transition of adult learners into higher education.

The reentry program observed in this study was established with adult learning transition in mind. The program, developed in the early 2000s, was initially formed to help adult women of color obtain a bachelor's degree. The program shifted its mission over the past two decades,

allowing non-minorities and males to participate in the program. Ultimately, this demographic

expansion made educational opportunities more accessible to a larger population of students.

Still, it also took resources and support away from a group that benefits from individualized care.

In its most recent iteration, the institution has developed programs, initiatives, and policies that

continue to support the transition of adult learners into the ranks. The reentry program

surrounded the learners with multiple microsystems of support within the classroom, the

program's office, and peers, including an academic resource center, a peer-to-peer mentoring

program, and access to free laptops and textbooks–efforts intended to combat the opposing

external forces that stall student success. Some of these external forces observed in the study

were related to financial burdens, balancing complicated home, work, life situations, and

physical and mental health challenges. The mesosystem relationships forged during their time in

the program assisted in removing financial barriers through the scholarships awarded to each

participant. These scholarships ensured that students could spend more time focusing on their

studies instead of worrying about any financial obligations. Additionally, institutional outreach

from the one-on-one meetings with Linda created an accountability partner who could assist the

participant with connecting them to on-campus resources to support their academic, professional,

and social needs.

Interactions Across Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner describes the exosystem as the psychological development of children in

the family affected by what happens in the other environments and what occurs in the different

settings (Bronfenrenner, 1986). Shifting the conversation from the child learner to the adult

learner can be interpreted as systems and external conditions situated outside of the individual's

immediate environment that influence the persons' outcomes. This sentiment was explicitly

discussed as a central focus in theme three, but it is also a relevant part of the other ecosystems connected to the research. For this study, the exosystem included the adult learner's local community, institutional programs and services, and work and life experience.

During the interviews, participants described how their work, church communities, and academic support services all assisted in keeping them motivated and grounded in both direct and unintended ways. These communities and structures that influenced the learners were constructed from each level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystem. As stated previously, the five systems are a part of a larger continuum that relies on the other systems to influence the learner's development. It consists of the multiple relationships formed on the micro-level and the interaction between the various mesosystems. Additionally, the exosystem is developed by beliefs, attitudes, and customs of a community or group associated with the learner and affected through transitional events in the individual's life that form the communities to which the learner belongs.

Interactions Across Macrosystem

The macrosystem has generally interpreted a set of attitudes, behaviors, ideologies, and norms that create the culture in which children navigate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The idea that the culture in which a learner is engrossed will influence their attitudes and beliefs about the world around them. Across the five themes listed in Chapter Four, the macro system was paramount in shaping the learners' educational experiences and how the greater society views them as nontraditional students of color. The attitudes and beliefs that professors and traditional students held concerning their nontraditional counterparts were evident within multiple themes. For better or worse, many preconceptions followed adult learners into the classroom, especially those students of color who may face added barriers. Whether it was the belief that NALs were

incapable of meeting academic expectations or that their commitments outside of the classroom would prove too challenging to overcome. The ideas imbued within the macrosystem of our society and learning community created obstacles and opportunities for many of our participants in the study.

One way of examining the rationale used to described nontraditional learners is through the concept of deficit-thinking. According to Portelli (as cited in Sharma, 2018), deficit thinking embraces an assumption that anything different from the standard way of doing something is intrinsically flawed or disadvantaged. For instance, a student's use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) may be considered "inadequate" in a classroom setting where standard English is the norm, even though no link exists between the use of AAVE and intelligence. Similarly, adult learners of color bring their home culture and language into the classroom. Still, when in reality divergent student backgrounds can enhance instructional learning, deficit thinking preempts this potential benefit. This deficit thinking is not new to the postsecondary educational realm. This frame of thought is prevalent from childhood, often contributing to a cyclical system that disregards students of color as incapable of success, locking them into the failed structure of poverty and limited resources (Meier, 2002). The greater societal beliefs and attitudes that educational institutions hold towards students of color from lower socioeconomic communities must change to see their differences as assets.

An additional area where behaviors, attitudes, and norms are created is in the household. Institutions of higher learning must understand that in communities of color, knowledge acquired in the home is just as important as what is taught in the classroom. Research by Gonzales, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, and Amanti (1995) discussed household knowledge in Latino communities. They emphasized the idea of local households containing necessary social and

intellectual resources for teachers and encouraging teachers to visit their students' homes. Requiring professors to visit their students' homes is not a recommended practice, but it is essential for faculty to develop meaningful relationships with their students by getting to know them and what unique skills and perspectives they bring to the classroom.

The university operationalized a particular set of attitudes and beliefs regarding its nontraditional student population, and these were central to forming the postsecondary reentry program. Upon speaking with the program director, Linda, she explained that the institution knew that their nontraditional learners faced various barriers along their journey. Therefore the institution created a specialized program to provide additional support to this population of learners. The establishment of this reentry program has led to profound change within the lives of the student participants in this study, which is evident in the interview transcripts quoted in Chapter Four. An additional example of this macrosystem level impact is displayed through government-level policy decisions that dictate appropriate support for nontraditional adult learners. During the Obama administration, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, published *The College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education*, which provided a detailed set of academic standards to engage adult learners pursuing postsecondary education. This document exemplifies a shift in mindsets on a national level related to the outcomes of adult learners in our nation's postsecondary institutions. Although these standards provided set guidelines for institutions to follow concerning educating adult learners, these standards perpetuate deficit thinking by centering the language and standards of the dominant culture as the norm and devaluing divergent perspectives and cultures.

Interactions Across Chronosystem

An individual's chronosystem represents the transitional changes in one's life. These

seismic shifts in a person's ecological systems are usually tied to an event or experience that has

lasting implications for an extensive period. Examples of chronosystem level incidents can

include historical events and life transitions, including the birth of a child, the death of a family

member, etc. These events are felt in many ways, and they ultimately shape the other layers of

systems underneath the chronosystem. Eamon (2001) examined the effects of poverty on

children's socioemotional development. In her research, she observed the impact of poverty on

all child's ecological systems. She determined that economic loss is more detrimental for

younger children and that poverty can linger throughout the child's life.

Chronosystem level events affect every part of the individuals' lived experience across all

levels of their ecosystems. Throughout the participant interviews, it was evident that one or

multiple significant events in the participant's lives nudged them towards pursuing

postsecondary education. Whether it was the death of a family member, overcoming substance

abuse, or the joy of setting a positive example for one's child, each participant had a reason that

pushed them towards continuing their education. The reentry program became the vehicle that

propelled the learners towards their intended goal, obtaining a bachelor's degree. Alternatively,

the experiences that the participants gained throughout the lower ecosystem levels continue to

influence the future chronosystem of the learner, creating a reciprocal relationship to and through

all their ecological systems.

Implications of Critical Race Theory

Throughout the research study, race played a pervasive and essential role in the

experience of nontraditional students of color. Although many nontraditional learners, regardless

of their race, faced specific barriers along their educational journey, students of color faced a

unique set of institutional, behavioral, and structural circumstances. To further emphasize this

point, aspects of Critical Race Theory provide a backdrop to demonstrate the various forms of

racism ingrained into the fabric of institutional policies and practices. Referencing the work of

Patton (2016), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), and Cross (1971), the following sections examine

the role that racism plays in upholding systems of oppression within institutions of higher

learning. The information provided will give rich content to the relevance and gravity of Critical

Race Theory as a foundational element of the research study.

Whiteness as Property

Higher education institutions have been promulgated on their proximity to and

preservation of Whiteness. From conception to its present-day existence, higher education and

access to these educational settings were built on excluding individuals outside of the dominant

societal group. Inferences to Whiteness as property can be seen in the use of classroom

curriculum that participants in the study described as "intimidating." For instance, participant

"Janice" stated, *"*A lot of professors and academics use a lot of jargon… it's part of their

language. I think in some ways, for nontraditional students of color, we're not used to talking like

that if we don't come from an academic background." Language is often the purveyor of

Whiteness in institutions of higher learning, and Janice's statement suggests that students of

color were disadvantage by the centering of Whiteness in language.

Whiteness as property is also witnessed in the institutional policies and practices that fail

to account for the educational, environmental, and social support systems that are important for

many adult learners of color. Even as demographic changes in the United States have made

educational opportunities more accessible to nontraditional students of color, issues such as

Eurocentric language standards and lack of diverse representation among the faculty all work

towards upholding a system that marginalizes learners of color. Furthermore, as discussed earlier

in this chapter, deficit thinking and its denotation of divergent cultures as deficient forces those

who sit at the margins of our society to be subjected to further marginalization.

Permanence of Racism

The weighted pressure of racism is inescapable for the nontraditional students observed

in this study. All participants, whether in their personal lives or during their time as students in

the program, deal with the remnants of racism ingrained into the very fabric of our society. Some

students described how social classism, which is intrinsically fostered and reinforced in racist

policies and practices, leads them towards an alternative lifestyle or abandoned them with

inadequate educational resources, making their journey exceedingly more difficult. Others

described personal events related to their identity as an "other," which led them to doubt their

intelligence and academic ability. Research by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described race

as a highly significant factor contributing to inequities in society. The permanence of race and

racism is in the seen and unseen forces that create barriers to access, opportunity, and power. In

this study, nontraditional students of color had to navigate societal and institutional inequities

during their pursuit of education, making the task of obtaining a postsecondary education even

more daunting.

Racial Cultural Identity Development

The racial and cultural identities of participants in this study were impacted by their

participation in the postsecondary reentry program. The learners conform to the institutional

culture through assimilation, which can be problematic for students whose cultural and racial

identity is vastly different from that of the dominant cultural group. Research by Cross (1971)

examined Black American racial identity convergence, which goes from pre-encounter (de-

emphasizing one's racial group membership) to internalization-commitment (a general sense of

commitment to concerns of blacks as a group). As nontraditional students of color attending a

predominately White institution, there was a widespread belief that their status made them

inferior to their White counterparts. For instance, Mary felt it was in her best interests to befriend

the younger White males in the classroom because she perceived them as more intelligent. Using

Cross's racial identity conversion, Mary was at the pre-encounter stage because she

unintentionally devalued her ability and assumed that White men are inherently smarter. This

belief is one example of the influence that predominately White institutions have on the racial-

cultural identity of nontraditional students of color.

Implications of Combined Theories

When combining the three theological frameworks, which include 1.) andragogy, 2.)

Critical Race Theory, and 3.) ecological systems theory, a more cohesive understanding of the

impact of postsecondary reentry programs begins to take shape. Figure 5 provides a visual

interpretation of the effects of the combined theories on the experience of nontraditional learners

of color in this study.

Figure 5

Combined Theories Interpretation
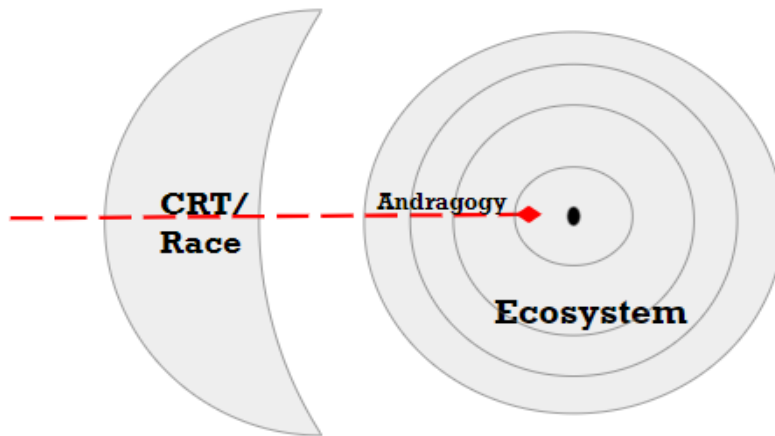
Note. The figure was used to illustrate how the three theoretical frameworks interact.

The figure above represents how andragogy, critical race, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory are all appear to be at play in the experience of our nontraditional participants. The overlapping circles on the right represent the various ecological systems of the learner, with the student depicted as the black dot at the center of the ring. These surrounding layers reflect the Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chronosystem of the learner as previously discussed. The crescent to the left of the ecosystem is interpreted as the lens of Critical Race Theory. This lens exemplifies how race and racism are inescapable and how they inevitably shape learner's views of the world and how the world views the learner. The intersecting red line represents andragogy. This line is a metaphor for teaching adult learners in the classroom. The line crosses through the lens of Critical Race Theory, symbolizing the racialization of classroom curriculum and instruction. Additionally, the line is also traversing the multiple ecosystems of the learning, which indicates that the student's environment impacts their learning at every level.

Overall, this figure shows the theories in action and provides a visual interpretation of the relevance and relation of the three frameworks.

Recommendations for Institutional Policies

Based on the analysis of data and artifacts in this study, several recommendations can assist institutions in developing a postsecondary reentry program for their nontraditional student population. These include, in sum (a) the development of formal mentorship programs for NALs of color, (b) hiring culturally diverse faculty and staff, (c) increasing diversity and inclusion awareness on campus, (d) identifying barriers and providing adequate academic support, (f) establishing a partnership with local community colleges, (g) supporting social-emotional needs and, (h) reducing cultural mismatch in education. Each recommendation receives more detailed discussion in the section below, with existing research providing support for the claims included. These recommendations include elements from the research host site that are highly effective, according to student testimonials, and areas that are critical to the adequate support of nontraditional learners of color.

Development of Formal Mentorship Programs for NALs of Color

A few participants informally stumbled upon mentors, mainly through a personal connection with their professors. There were talks of a mentorship program being available, but many students had no idea if it was an active program. For students to receive the appropriate support needed to complete their education, institutions must implement a dynamic formal mentorship experience for their nontraditional learners. Mentors are used in various capacities and environmental settings, and they often include individuals of varying ages, genders, races, orientations, and abilities. Fransson and McMahan (2013) described mentoring as a multi-professional activity that is an essential resource for building a person's competence, personal

growth, and professionalism. At its core lies the principle of self-discovery, where the mentee is learning about his or her capacity for accomplishing a task.

Over the past three decades, the use of mentors has grown among many higher educational institutions (Terrell & Wright, 1988). Over the decades, it has taken on a targeted approach, encapsulating aspects of race and identity to strengthen the educational outcomes for underrepresented groups and act as a tool to socialize mentees with their mentors, acclimating them to their new environment (Laden, 1999). An abundance of examples illustrates the impact of mentorship programs on underrepresented minority groups. For instance, the Puente Project is a California community college program that supports first-generation Latino college students who are academically at-risk of dropping out of college. Focusing institutional efforts on strengthening their use of faculty mentors can significantly impact student outcomes, as witnessed in the testimonies of students who relied on faculty mentors for support in the classroom.

The study provides relevant insight into how reentry programs can structure a formal mentoring model. As referenced in Chapter Four, all the students in the study had access to a one-on-one session with Linda, the program director. Instead of the director being the sole resource for conducting an individualized session, the program should utilize a formal paring system to connect students with a professor who has similar academic backgrounds, research interests, or a similar cultural association. This method can ensure that mentorship activities are formalized and can effectively support students with diverse needs.

Hire More Faculty and Staff of Color

Studies show that faculty of color make up only 17% of full-time faculty in the United Stated (Turner, González & Wood, 2008). Unfortunately, when you divide those numbers by

race, it becomes even more disproportionate, with Black faculty at 5.5% and Hispanic faculty at

3.5%, respectively. Having culturally diverse faculty is critical to preparing students for diversity

in the real world. Studies show that there are links between the educational challenges of

students of color and the absence of teachers of color (Souto-Mnning & Dice, 2007). On the

broader level, hiring more diverse faculty reduces academic disparities and adverse educational

outcomes for many students of color (Llaman, Nguyen, & Tran, 2019). Therefore, for institutions

to effectively support underrepresented students' academic and interpersonal development, the

institution itself must reflect the diversity of the learning population.

When describing the various cultural implications of race and academic success, the

participants in the study explained how the culture of academia was not reflective of their

cultural backgrounds. Some of the students also shared stories about the lack of diverse

professors they could rely on for support. For instance, Jessica discussed Black professor's use of

silent support in the classroom, stating that Black professors did not feel comfortable enough to

express their support with Black students for fear of backlash. This fear of backlash felt by Black

professors is a symptom of the oppressive systems that continue to silence voices of color

attempt to step out of line. Research by Squire (2020) examined the experience of faculty of

color. It determined faculty of color often worked harder, were more isolated, felt that their

voices were silenced, and ultimately experienced the academy as an alienating place for them.

This ties into the notion of Whiteness as property seen within institutions of higher learning,

where the power and privilege of the dominant social class dictate the access and influence that

marginalized groups are afforded. Universities must cultivate environments of inclusion and

belonging, where professors of color are encouraged to build connections with students in a

meaningful and authentic way. Any perceived belief of backlash based on supporting learners of

color may continue to isolate students who may already have difficulty navigating these spaces. In conclusion, universities should prioritize hiring professors of color, give faculty of color the freedom to be seen, heard, and acknowledged, and encourage employees to engage in relationship building with underrepresented student populations.

Increase Diversity and Inclusion Awareness on Campus

As student populations become more racially and culturally heterogeneous, universities need to educate their students, faculty, and staff on issues related to diversity and inclusion while leveraging their resources to strengthen community among these diverse populations. Some of the participants in this study described situations where misunderstandings due to their race or religion were experienced. For example, Paul explained how he felt "prejudice due to the way I present myself and how I present myself as a person of color" (Paul, personal communication, September 17, 2020). Malik also described how he felt his professor did not understand that his religious beliefs often dictated the classroom content he could consume.

Research by Clauson and McKnight (2018) also discussed the increased need for universities to build awareness around students' intersectional identities. Intersectionality, which Kimberle Crenshaw coined, examined how overlapping identities often influence marginalized communities. In early literature, Crenshaw (1989) provided insight into the challenges of being a Black woman. She stated,

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (p.143).

This quote describes the challenge of having various marginalized identities that often intersect. You can be a woman of color and face multiple forms of discrimination due to your gender and race. Similarly, nontraditional learners of color are impacted by their status as adult learners in a traditionally youth-centered system and as people of color studying at a predominately White institution. There are additional layers of complexity when age, gender, and socioeconomic status are incorporated. Clauson and McKnight (2018) suggest that professional staff be fully trained on topics related to identity development. Community dialogue and general awareness must be cultivated within institutions of higher learning, especially given the shifting demographics among the student body. For students of all backgrounds to thrive, institutions must be willing to create inclusive and welcoming environments for all learners.

Identify Barriers and Provide Adequate Institutional Support

Financial challenges were viewed as one of the most significant barriers to the successful enrollment of participants in this program. The reentry program in this study covers roughly 80% of the tuition and fees for students enrolled in their program. This financial support makes it easier for NALs to access educational spaces that were once considered inaccessible due to cost. In a study by Hunter-Johnson (2017), approximately 85% of the adult learners interviewed described financial restraints as a vital factor in their inability to pursue higher education. Any institution attempting to reduce barriers for their adult learning population must first provide adequate financial resources to make higher education accessible. Institutions should also incorporate a needs assessment to understand their underrepresented, at-risk student populations required to navigate their environment.

However, there are quite a few other barriers preventing NALs from pursuing postsecondary education. One significant barrier is the disproportionate focus on youth within

institutions of higher learning. Research by Chen (2017) described youth-centricity as a barrier that institutions fail to acknowledge. On-campus resources are primarily geared towards traditional-age students: office hours are generally inaccessible beyond certain times, social groups and programming are often unavailable during the workday, and there remains a lack of access to daycare options (where students with adequate childcare options are three times more likely to graduate from college). Additional hurdles are found within the application process itself. Institutions must ensure that students, specifically nontraditional students of color, can easily access the application for admission into the reentry program. Many of the students relied on people who were directly affiliated with the program to provide information regarding enrollment. Therefore, it is safe to assume that students who were not privy to the insight from individuals directly connected to the reentry program may have missed out on the opportunity. Suppose institutions are committed to making their campuses barrier-free and more accessible to nontraditional learners. In that case, they must be willing to invest in resources and reconsider their traditionalist approach to education that hinders their NALs from fully participating in the educational experience.

Lastly, institutions must provide faculty with the knowledge and resources to effectively engage with learners from different cultural backgrounds. This is especially important as we discuss issues related to language that frequently centers on White culture, causing marginalized students to become resistant to learning. A study by White (2011) examined the role that academic discourse and cultural conflict have in the educational outcomes and participation of minority students. The researcher found that minority students, in order to maintain their sense of self and cultural identity, sometimes opt not to participate in academic discourse. Educators must be made aware of the cultural norms, language patterns, and differing values that students of

color bring with them into the classroom. Just as K-12 educators must be trained to respond to and effectively support culturally diverse classrooms, so must be the case for professors on the collegiate level.

Establish Partnership with Local Community Colleges

Some of the participants in the study expressed their dissatisfaction with their community college experience, describing their educational experience as "like high school" and a "breeze." It is important to note that five of the seven interviewees attended community colleges in lower SES communities with higher attrition rates. Ultimately, it could be beneficial for postsecondary reentry programs, such as the one observed in this study, to establish some form of partnership with local community colleges to ease the academic and social transition into the four-year institution. An article by Dewine, Bresciani Ludvik, Tucker, Mulholland, Bracken (2017) described the concept of *transfer shock,* where students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions experience a drastic dip in their grades. This concept could explain why the nontraditional learners interviewed in this study felt that their university experience was notably more challenging than their community college education. They entered the university setting with a lack of support and appropriate resources to transition them from a two-year to a four-year education.

The research by Dewine et al. (2017) describes how some universities use academic advisors to support the students before they officially transition into their respective four-year institutions. The students in the Dewine study acknowledged that the university advisors were more accessible and provided adequate support in the learner's academic decision-making. In comparison, the students viewed the academic advising on the community college level as slower and less effective. Consequently, it may be in the best interest of the reentry program and

of the nontraditional learners to have a streamlined process in which the program and the

community college actively support the student as they transition into their new educational

environment. This may assist in easing the academic uncertainty nontraditional students of color

face upon entering the four-year institution.

Support Socio-Emotional Needs

Many of the nontraditional learners in this study faced obstacles and hardships that

created an array of socio-emotional barriers. Whether these challenges were economic,

academic, or general difficulties brought on by extenuating circumstances, the reentry program

was expected to support the whole learner and all the circumstances they bring along with them.

From the participant interviews, it was observed that the reentry program provided a plethora of

academic and financial supports for the students, including, but not limited to, academic advising

and scholarship assistance. Yet, more could have been done to adequately address the socio-

emotional barriers that nontraditional students of color faced.

An article was written by Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez, and

Lindsey (2004) explored the role that social support resources had on the outcomes of

nontraditional students. It was observed that many of the nontraditional learners in their study

who have robust family support systems received their social-emotion validation from family

and friends - while those students with less family support relied on the use of on-campus

support services. The students used college counselors for guidance when external support

networks did not exist, helping the students develop social skills and build self-esteem.

Therefore, it is recommended that the postsecondary reentry programs increase the use of college

counselors and other on-campus professionals to create alternative support systems to satisfy the

social-emotional needs of nontraditional learners.

Reducing cultural mismatch in education

When publicly White institutions (PWIs) are tasked with educating students from differing cultural backgrounds, there is often a miscommunication that occurs, and certain niceties are lost in translation. Chapter Four highlighted students' experiences in the study to explore how nontraditional learners of color are at a disadvantage due to the culture and language of academia and how it is often exclusive to people outside of the culture. Delpit (1995) described a similar situation in her book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. This book suggests that educational institutions should teach students with the learner's cultural roots in mind. She explained that students from underrepresented cultures struggled to conform to the language and teaching styles of the dominant communities.

Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to meet the students where they are, regardless of background or nontraditional student status. Professionals must recognize the power differential in the classroom and actively create a learning environment inclusive of all cultural backgrounds and learning styles. Outside of hiring for more diversity within the academic ranks, institutions must train faculty to adjust their curriculum in a culturally reflective and unbiased way, especially if institutions intend to create an inclusive learning community and support students with diverse backgrounds. Annual faculty training on cultural diversity and divergent learning styles must be a requirement for all institutions of higher learning. Like the continuous education hours that primary and secondary educators must obtain, postsecondary faculty must hold themselves to the same standard. Universities should consider tying faculty tenure not only to the research and teaching opportunities that one engages in but might also credit a candidate's pertinent professional development activities.

Additionally, cultural mismatch must be viewed from the student's perspective, who must

adapt to an entirely different environment from what they are accustomed to experiencing. First-generation college students often experience a cultural mismatch concerning their motives to attend college or due to stark differences in social class (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2020). These differences experienced by the learner are persistent for many first-generation students, and they tend to struggle to find belonging in their educational environments. As witnessed through the participant interviews in Chapter Four, many participants found it challenging to connect with their younger counterparts. This distinction was due to age, external commitments, cultural barriers, or lack of interest. Ultimately, postsecondary reentry programs must find a way to limit cultural mismatch if they intend on attaining favorable outcomes for their students. This process can be achieved through more direct counseling opportunities for nontraditional learners of color through structured mentorship programs or by strengthening peer-to-peer relationships.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A case study methodology helps provide a glimpse into a subject's mind, delivering a depth of understanding that a quantitative approach cannot provide. Dependent on the type of data a researcher intends to gather, a quantitative or mixed-method approach can help garner a unique insight that a case study may not be intended to explore. Suppose a researcher is looking to understand how a student of color in the reentry program compares by rank and measure. In that case, a quantitative or mixed methods approach, pairing one-on-one interviews and surveys with statistical data, could provide findings and insight that answer the question differently. A qualitative methodology is a beneficial tool, allowing the researcher to uncover the personal narratives of each participant, giving a unique perspective that examines an individual's thoughts and feelings. In contrast, a quantitative approach will explore data and metrics to measure the

effectiveness of some variables. Both have their specific strengths, but a mixed-method or quantitative methodology can provide a different lens to view the phenomenon depending on the research question.

Several recommendations support the `need for development of additional research that will illuminate the effectiveness of postsecondary reentry programs. First, a more extensive quantitative comparison study examining nontraditional students of color and using grade point averages (GPA) of those enrolled in the reentry program would be helpful, comparing them to adult learners who are not enrolled in the reentry program. This use of a control group would allow researchers to observe if the specific interventions and support resources provided to students enrolled in the reentry program truly influenced their educational outcomes or if the reentry program provided learners with a perceived benefit.

Conducting an additional quantitative study that examines a larger, more diverse student population, spanning across multiple institutions, could provide the analysis with greater validity and more generalizability. The research only considers a small sample of students from one school in the current study, so it is tenuous to generalize results in a manner relevant or appropriate for institutions in other regions with varying sizes and budgetary capacity. Having a more comprehensive depth and breadth of student participants can significantly benefit when attempting to provide programmatic recommendations on a broader level.

Finally, a qualitative study of Black male adult learners could provide interesting results. According to research by Goings (2016), Black men comprise 5.4% of the college attendees across the nation, and only a third of them successfully graduate in 6 years. Further investigation of this demographic of a learner is needed to raise critical awareness of this phenomenon. In this current study, only two of the seven participants were men, and demographically, men only

made up 16% of the reentry programs population, with specific numbers unknown for Black

men. There is a large void in research that could be filled by leaning into this population better to

understand student outcomes and achievement better.

Conclusion

The success of nontraditional learners of color is rooted in the environments that impact

their lives on many levels. The learner's chronosystem acts as a seismic force altering the

trajectory of lives; the macrosystems guides the learner's beliefs and attitudes about their values

and abilities; the exosystems are the unseen forces that play a more significant role in their

academic experiences; the mesosystems contains the vast networks of support that provide

resources that will have a life-changing impact on learner's outcomes; and the microsystem

encompasses the individuals' direct connections--family, friends, mentors— all acting as

beacons of hope and encouragement for the student along the way. Within these interconnected

systems, the role of education is the driving force and the reason why these individuals are here.

The institutions of learning are providing adult learners with an opportunity to achieve a goal

that has been deferred decades for some. The use of andragogy and how professors present their

curriculum to their adult students can build confidence or cause them to shy away from academic

success.

Suppose institutions of higher learning are intent on educating the growingly diverse

populations of students enrolling on campus. In that case, it is in their interests to support all

students' academic and social development, including their nontraditional learning population,

who make up 35% of the nation's college student body (Gross, 2018). This will require a safety

net of resources that expand far beyond financial and academic assistance and into more holistic

support methods, including socioemotional resources. Universities must create barrier-free

institutions that help to relieve any unnecessary obstacles, allowing the learner to concentrate

their efforts entirely on their academic achievement.

The results of the study suggest that there are five major themes related to the lived and

academic experiences of nontraditional learners enrolled in a postsecondary reentry program: (a)

network of support, (b) institutional relationships and impact on the learner, (c) influential

factors (d) cultural norms and expectations of self, and (e) critical life events. Direct student

interviews suggest that the relationships built on the microsystem level were integral to their

academic success and motivation. This relationship included strong bonds created between

administrators in the reentry program and the students enrolled in the program. The program

helped reduce financial barriers for students, covering 80% of their first-year costs. Reducing

this barrier allowed them the freedom to focus more time and energy on completing their

courses, as opposed to worrying about how to finance their education. The program supported

students with additional services, including laptop loans, academic tutoring centers, book

stipends, and other social support services.

Relationships with faculty and traditional-aged peers were also essential for the study.

Most of the students interviewed felt a sense of indifference towards their younger classmates,

not going out of their way to involve themselves with students outside of the program.

Conversely, nearly all the students reported a positive relationship with their professors, with a

few exceptions. In addition, the adult learners' experiences outside of the educational setting

created pivotal moments of growth and self-reflection. A few of the interviewees were candid

about personal situations that have influencd their view of life, family, and education.

Both the student's motivations and institution play a critical role in the outcomes that

nontraditional students of color ultimately face. The institution is responsible for fortifying an

inclusive environment built on principles of diversity, equity, and belonging. They must meet

students and create necessary resources and systems to keep them engaged and track.

Meanwhile, students must find the motivation to learn despite the obstacles they face. They must

rely on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that fuel them to keep moving forward against the

odds.

   To conclude, the reentry program observed was an invaluable resource to all the

participants in the study. Every student believed that their enrollment positively influenced their

academic and social outcomes. The following quote by "Paul" encapsulates the general

sentiment about the reentry program. "Going to school as a nontraditional student is like going to

school for the first day of school at a new high school. Nobody knows you. You don't have any

friends. You're kind of alone. The reentry program provides an opportunity for you to not be

alone in those environments."

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Theme: Student Background (Microsystem Impact)

- Tell me about yourself.
- Describe the environment in which you were raised.
- How would you describe your current environment?
- Tell me about your decision to go back to school?
- Who has supported you the most through this process?
- What is your experience like as a nontraditional student?

Theme: Institution/Faculty Relationship (Micro & Mesosystem Impact)

- Tell me about your experience in the program.
- How did you learn about the reentry program?
- In what ways would you change the reentry program? What would you keep the same?
- Describe a critical incident between you and your professors.
- Describe a critical incident between you and the program.

Theme: Academic Success (Meso & Exosystem Impact)

- Tell me about your academic experience.
- What academic support services were you provided?
- What financial support services, if any, have you been provided?
- How has participating in the program shaped your academic experience?
- Who has supported you the most academically?
- What do you hope to accomplish after you complete the program?

Theme: Attitudes & Beliefs (Macrosystem Impact)

- Why is education important to you?
- How did your experience in the reentry program shape your view of college?
- In what way has your enrollment impacted your children's view of education (if applicable)?
- What have you learned from this experience?

APPENDIX B: Additional Figures and Artifacts

Academic Renewal for Returning Learners, course syllabus, Fall 2019

Admissions requirements and learning outcomes, undated

Annual program report, July 15, 2019

Reentry program demographics information, website, undated

Reentry program recruitment video, August 2020

Student enrollment information by major, undated

APPENDIX C: IRB

Submission ID: HUM00170201
Study Title: Post-Secondary Re-Entry Programs: Examining Outcomes of Non-Traditional Students of Color
Full Study Title (if applicable):
PI: Eric McCloud
Submission State: Exempt Approved - Initial

TEXT OF CORRESPONDENCE
Hi Eric and Paul: The study has been given an Exempt Category 2 determination. If you expand the research to other schools or if you want to change anything you are doing with this study, please send me a Posted Correspondence from the study workspace. Don't forget to click IRB HSBS when you submit because if you don't I won't be notified of the message. One thing you should do is add a statement to the consent document above the signature line section:

The IRB Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has reviewed this study and determined that it is Exempt from IRB oversight.

You do not need to amend the application, simply send me a copy of the revised consent via a posted correspondence.

Feel free to contact me any time if you have any questions or concerns, or if something goes wrong or you receive a subject complaint.

Best wishes for the success of this project.

Deb Schneider, CIP
(734) 763-5084
Submitted by: Deb Schneider

APPENDIX D: General Consent Release

Consent to be part of a Study

Title of the Project: Post Secondary Re-entry Programs:

Examining Outcomes for Non-Traditional Students of Color

Principal Investigator: Eric R. McCloud, University of Michigan Dearborn

Faculty Advisor: Paul Fossum, Ph.D., University of Michigan Dearborn

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of post-secondary reentry programs on the outcomes of nontraditional learners of color. Participant stories will be explored to understand what contributes to the social and academic outcomes of learners enrolled in a designated reentry program.
  If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in 1-2 short virtual interviews and allow the researcher perhaps to attend one of the mandatory courses. The interviews will begin at the start of the fall semester and conclude in approximately 30 days. These interviews will be recorded, either via password-protected Zoom or Google Meet platforms. All recordings will be transcribed immediately and destroyed. Recordings and transcriptions will be given pseudonyms. An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include feeling uncomfortable about answering questions about the student's personal experience regarding their nontraditional status. Steps are in place to ensure there is no breach of confidentiality; the researcher will not share with participants who are or is not in the study. Interviews will be conducted one-on-one. If there's a breach of confidentiality, all data will be deleted immediately. There are also informational risks. All identifying information (e.g., name, position, email, phone, district) will immediately be coded, and pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality. The designated institution's name and the name of the reentry program will be protected by pseudonyms as well. Information will be stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive. An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office.
- The study will not benefit you directly but may benefit other institutions in the future. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time. You may choose

whether or not you provide any of the following data: responses to interview questions, documents, etc. If you decide to withdraw early, the researcher will destroy any computer files or paper copies of research data.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research

project.

What is the study about, and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of post-secondary reentry programs on the outcomes of nontraditional learners of color. Participant stories will be explored to understand what contributes to the social, behavioral, and academic outcomes of learners enrolled in the designated reentry program.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete 1-2 virtual interviews with the researcher. I expect each interview to take about one hour.

- The information collected during virtual interviews and virtual educational events will be synthesized with the previous research on the topic. These interviews will be recorded via password-protected Zoom or Google Meet platforms. Transcriptions and recordings will be given pseudonyms. All recordings will be transcribed immediately and destroyed. Survey responses will receive pseudonyms as well. An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, other leaders might benefit from your experiences.

What risks might result from being in this study?

There are some risks you might experience from being in this study.

- Some risks are psychological or feelings of discomfort when sharing the intimate details of your experience as a nontraditional adult learner of color.

- There are also informational risks.

   - All identifying information (name, position, email, phone, school) will immediately be coded, and

pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality.

- ■ The institution's name will be protected by pseudonyms as well.
- ■ Information will be stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive.
- ■ An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office.

How will we protect your information?

I plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, I will not include any information that could directly identify you. I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by ensuring that all identifying information (name, position, email, phone, district) will immediately be coded, and pseudonyms will be used. Information will be stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive. Your name, position, email, phone, district, and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project. To keep your school district information safe, I will code the name of your school district with a pseudonym as well. This information is stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive. An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office. Other people may need to see the information we collect about you. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, such as the University of Michigan IRB.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

I will keep your research data to use for future research. Your name, position, email, phone, district, and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project. I will protect the confidentiality of your research records by ensuring that all identifying information will immediately be coded and pseudonyms will be used. Information will be stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive. To keep your school district information safe, I will code the name of your institution and program with a pseudonym as well. This information is also stored in a Duo Protected UofM Google Drive. An encrypted jump drive will be used as additional protection to back up any information pulled from cloud storage—interviews and the pseudonym document. The jump drive will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the PI's home office.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

- It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time. You may choose whether or not you provide any of the following data: responses to interview questions, documents, etc. Your colleague will not know whether or not you chose to participate in the study. If you decide to withdraw early, the researcher will destroy any computer files or paper copies of research data.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Eric R. McCloud, ermc@umich.edu, 313-768-4813 or**

Paul Fossum, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor, pfossum@umich.edu, 734-645-0023.

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or

discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

University of Michigan

Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board

2800 Plymouth Road

Building 520, Room 1169

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800

Phone: (734) 936-0933 or toll free, (866) 936-0933

Email: irbhsbs@umich.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before

you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy of the study records. If you

have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the

information provided above. If you would like to learn the findings of this study, please email me at

ermc@umich.edu, and I will be happy to forward that information to you. Any results shared with you will be summarized, aggregated across sites, and triangulated as often as possible so that no one will be able to identify other participants on their site. Thank you for your participation in this study.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature   Date

Consent to be Audio/Video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded.

YES_____   NO_____

Signature   Date

Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research

*If you agree to participate in the study but do not consent to your data being used for future research or to being contacted for future research, you may still participate in the study

I give the researcher permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future research projects.

YES_____   NO_____

Signature   Date

APPENDIX E: Documentation of Field Research Events

This lists the field research performed in the execution of this study. Following the desires of eight research participants, and per suggestions of the University of Michigan-Dearborn's Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects Committee, participants have been given a pseudonym to conceal the identities of the participants.

9/9/2020, Debra, subject 1. Semi-structured interview and open-ended interviews: provided information.

9/10/2020, Jessica, subject 2. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information.

9/11/2020, Mary, subject 3. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

9/13/2020, Malik, subject 4. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

9/15/2020, Janice, subject 5. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

9/17/2020. Paul, subject 6. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

9/30/2020, Kim, subject 7. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

9/29/2020 Linda, subject 8. Administrative perspective. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided information

10/2/2020, Kim, subject 7. Follow-up interview. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews: provided additional information

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