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# Academic and social experiences of undergraduate college students at a branch campus: a case study

Kristi S. Mindrup  
*University of Iowa*

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ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE  
STUDENTS AT A BRANCH CAMPUS: A CASE STUDY

by  
Kristi S. Mindrup

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in  
Educational Policy and Leadership Studies (Higher Education and Student Affairs)  
in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Sherry K. Watt

## ABSTRACT

Previous research about undergraduate students with nontraditional college experiences has focused primarily on students' demographic characteristics, their deficits compared to residential students, and their risk for attrition. This case study conducted at a university branch campus in the Midwest examined undergraduate college experiences at a campus where nontraditional college experiences are typical. Case study findings revealed that college students were defined by their rich and detailed biography of prior life experiences, successes and challenges for student transition, and experiences with academic and social engagement. Findings also revealed students' strong sense of motivation and ability to thrive and succeed in college.

Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Supervisor

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Title and Department

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Date

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Kristi S. Mindrup

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies (Higher Education and Student Affairs) at the May 2012 graduation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The branch campuses of four-year institutions have emerged as a “significant addition to the landscape of American higher education” as they extend college and university opportunities to a broader public (Wolfe & Strange, 2003, p. 343). The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defines the branch campus as geographically apart and independent of the main or home campus of the institution (2010). The branch campus offers educational programs that lead to a degree; has its own faculty and administrative organization, academic resources, and support services for students; and has its own budget and hiring authority (HLC, 2010). This section describes the history of the branch campus in the U.S. and provides a rationale for studying undergraduate students’ experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest.

Colleges and universities throughout history have progressively expanded their mission to provide educational opportunities for nontraditional students previously underserved by higher education (Ogren, 2003). Southern Illinois University is one example of such an institution. The State of Illinois established Southern Illinois University (SIU) in 1869 to expand opportunities for teacher education in the region of Carbondale, Illinois (Lentz, 1955). In 1957, Southern Illinois University continued to expand geographically and opened a branch campus in Edwardsville, Illinois. The SIU branch campus in Edwardsville served a new population of people who previously had little access to higher education. Although the Edwardsville region had the largest population in Illinois outside of metropolitan Chicago, just 3% of adults in the region held a bachelor’s degree (SIU Edwardsville, 2011). The new branch campus, because of its geographic proximity to a previously underserved population, began to serve adult students and others who had not been able to attend college previously (SIU Edwardsville, 2011).

Many institutions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century began to embrace similar opportunities to expand educational programs and services to nontraditional students. Four-year colleges and universities established course and program articulation agreements with community colleges and expanded their programs to off-campus locations “convenient to a critical mass of transfer students” (Thelin, 2004, p. 327). The branch campus experienced significant growth in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century and evolved into an extension of the four-year institution (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003). Through the branch campus, adult students, transfer students, and students with low socio-economic backgrounds gained access to a four-year education, with similar academic programs tailored to student needs (Komives et al., 2003). Much like the role of normal schools, the branch campuses began to offer educational opportunities to nontraditional students who were previously unable to enroll in college for geographic reasons (University Business, 2007).

Many types of institutions began to consider the experiences of part-time and returning adult students in the middle 1970s as a result of a changing student profile (Thelin, 2004). Four-year admissions offices and student affairs centers recognized the unique characteristics and accommodations required by students who did not fit the traditional profile of full-time residential students between the ages of 18 and 22 years. During this era, institutions began to use the term “nontraditional” to define a population of students who had access to community colleges but were increasingly seeking access to four-year degrees (Thelin, 2004).

Although branch institutions have made significant contributions to the education of nontraditional students, limited research has examined the experiences of these students and the branch campuses that serve them (University Business, 2007; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Branch campuses are expanding because of the increased number of students who are place-bound due to limited financial resources, family responsibilities, personal characteristics, and lifestyle, and branch campuses are the sole educational

option for these students (University Business, 2007). Nontraditional students are a growing population; 75% of students on all types of college campuses are in some way nontraditional (NCES, 2002). The next sections highlight key reasons why research about nontraditional student experiences on a branch campus will fill a significant gap in the literature and will also address the need to understand the growing population of nontraditional college students.

### *Rationale*

This section provides the rationale for conducting research about nontraditional student experiences on a branch campus. Although this rationale begins with a call for research because nontraditional students are an at-risk population, it is important to extend research beyond an examination of deficits in order to represent those individuals who are not adequately represented in the literature. This section discusses the importance of conducting research that accurately represents the stories and experiences of nontraditional students within the context of an institution where nontraditional students represent the typical experience on a college campus. Finally, this section proposes a research question to implement a study that examines nontraditional student experience on a branch campus.

### *Nontraditional Students at Risk*

A notable portion of students with nontraditional characteristics and backgrounds fail to accomplish their educational goals, and institutions have failed to graduate a significant number of nontraditional students with a baccalaureate degree (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Some behaviors typical of nontraditional students increase the likelihood that they will not complete a four-year degree. Three factors that contribute to student attrition are delayed enrollment, interrupted enrollment, or transfer to another institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Branch campuses often provide primarily junior and senior academic programs to community college transfers, and these transfer students and students who enroll intermittently are at increased risk for attrition (Wolfe & Strange,

2003). Student retention is a critical element to determine whether an institution is accomplishing its mission (Sorey & Duggan, 2008, as cited in Fincher, 2010). Therefore it is important to understand the ways that nontraditional college student experiences align with the institutional mission of branch campuses.

### *Representing the Nontraditional Experience*

Almost 30 years ago, Kniefelkamp and Stewart (1983) noted that even though nontraditional students comprised the majority of students on college campuses, and especially at branch campuses, researchers and institutions typically acknowledged these students only in comparison to traditional residential students. Still today, just over 2% of higher education-focused research has considered nontraditional students and their experiences (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007), and there is limited inquiry about the branch campus or the students who attend those campuses (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). College personnel have little evidence that suggests how to best serve branch campus students, and researchers must begin to consider and represent nontraditional student experiences.

### *Empowering the Nontraditional Experience*

In 1983, Kniefelkamp and Stewart called for inquiry about nontraditional students to include students not previously considered in higher education research. As branch campuses continue to emerge in the U.S., inquiry about nontraditional students who attend these institutions has the potential to empower the experiences of students not present in existing research. Many higher education researchers previously examined residential college students and their environments, their educational and social experiences, their involvement while in college, and the impact of individual identity characteristics on student learning (Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research on college students who attend branch campuses must shift the focus from demographics and move toward investigating what these students experience while

they are in college to understand and ultimately improve their college success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

A study about student experiences on a branch campus reflects more accurately the experiences and stories this group of students because they can be examined in an environment where the nontraditional, nonresidential college experience is typical (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Komives et al., 2003). Research that illuminates nontraditional characteristics such as maturity, off-campus living, and multiple life roles must be explored (Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983).

### *Summary*

Branch campuses compared to traditional institutions serve a proportionately higher proportion of students who are defined by higher education institutions and research as nontraditional, including students who delay enrollment, are employed, commute to campus, and have dependent children (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Choy, 2002; Compton, Cox, & Lanaan, 2006; NCES, 2002; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983). Research about branch campuses and the students who attend them is long overdue (University Business, 2007). Inquiry about branch campus students' challenges and experiences will shed light on the ways college personnel can focus efforts to meet the needs and represent the voices of nontraditional college students who were previously ignored by higher education research.

Colleges and universities that attract students with nontraditional characteristics and attendance patterns must avoid fostering negative perceptions about these students by focusing only on their risk of attrition and begin to emphasize the whole life experience of all students (Andreas, 1983). College personnel must be prepared to understand the experiences of a growing population of nontraditional students on today's college campuses in order to foster their success in college. Research about nontraditional college student experiences on a branch campus, where their characteristics and backgrounds comprise the majority of students, will embrace the value of their

experiences and avoid deficit comparisons to traditional college students. This research will add to the literature about how nontraditional undergraduate students experience academics and social activities during their college years and will provide insight about whether current best practices and student development theories are applicable to the nontraditional student experience.

#### *Research Question*

How do undergraduate college students experience academics and social activities while enrolled in a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest?

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate college student experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled in a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest.

#### *Definitions*

##### *Branch Campus*

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defines the branch campus as “geographically apart and independent of the main or home campus of the institution” (2010). The branch campus offers educational programs that lead to a degree; has its own faculty and administrative organization, academic resources, and support services for students; and has its own budget and hiring authority (HLC, 2010).

##### *College Student Experiences*

The college student experiences consist of the events that occur while students are enrolled in college (Pace, 1980). For this study, experiences are defined as academic and social experiences. Academic experiences include student patterns of enrolling in courses, attending college classes, and balancing multiple life priorities. Social experiences are student experiences that include interpersonal relationships with friends and family both on and off campus. Social experiences also include living



circumstances, employment, and other situations that require personal interaction with others.

#### *Undergraduate Branch Campus Students*

Undergraduate branch campus students are individuals who are enrolled in courses at a branch campus and are seeking a bachelor's degree. Note that this study focuses on those undergraduate branch campus students who seek to obtain a bachelor's degree, although there may be undergraduate branch campus students who enroll in courses for other reasons.

#### *Nontraditional Students*

The National Center for Education Statistics (2002a) defined nontraditional students according to their enrollment timing, employment, and family status. Nontraditional enrollment patterns include delayed enrollment into college by at least one year after graduation and part-time course enrollment. Nontraditional students are often employed, financially independent of their parents, and have dependents other than a spouse (NCES, 2002). Many nontraditional students are adults older than 22 years of age (Compton et al., 2006).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *Introduction*

Although the branch campus has emerged as a significant addition to American higher education, higher education research about branch campuses is limited (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Literature about institutions that serve nontraditional students is lacking in higher education history and research (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kodama, 2002; Pascarella, 2006). In addition to the lack of literature about different types of college and universities, there is also a significant gap in research about the students who attend them. Institutions such as branch campuses serve a proportionately higher population of students defined by higher education as “nontraditional” (Compton et al., 2006). In addition, 75% of students on all types of college campuses are in some way nontraditional (NCES, 2002).

Although nontraditional students have been present at colleges and universities throughout history, the term “nontraditional” and research about this population of students characterizes them as atypical (Ogren, 2003). One way to understand the historical characteristics and experiences of nontraditional students, and those students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, is to consider their experiences at institutions whose mission it is to serve them (Ogren, 2003).

This literature review first considers how higher education and college student research has perceived nontraditional students. The majority of research conducted about students who are adults, delay enrollment, and commute to campus; students with low socio-economic backgrounds; and students who balance multiple priorities is based on a foundation that this population of students brings atypical backgrounds to the college experience at a residential four-year college or university. “Nontraditional students,” as they are defined in the literature, have emerged during the past century as the majority student population on all types of modern college campuses; yet, many four-year

institutions still consider the traditional student experience and population as the valued norm (Komives et al., 2003).

This literature review next explores academic and social experiences typical of the college students served by branch campuses. Existing research has considered the characteristics, pathways, and impacts on college students who delay enrollment, attend part-time, and make decisions within situated contexts that include financial and familial considerations. This also includes the ways students experience all aspects of life while they are in college. Existing research has considered the educational biography of the nontraditional student who has multiple life commitments that include family relationships, employment, living off-campus, and level of engagement in class and social activities.

This literature review concludes with a discussion of related theories to frame the experiences of students who typically attend branch campuses. Student development theory discusses how adults construct their sense of self and how they socially construct their lives based on assumed roles. Student success theory considers college students' interaction and engagement with their learning environments as conditions for success. Both of these theories generally apply to the traditional student experience. The student thriving quotient (Schreiner, 2010) expands on student success to encompass psychological well-being and to consider college students' ability to maintain healthy relationships, a sense of community, a sense of contribution, and the ability to cope as key factors in college student success. This theory is more applicable to the individual and therefore is not dependent on stages of development that may be more relevant to traditional students.

It is important to note that labeling students as "nontraditional" implies that higher education institutions do not value the characteristics or experiences of this group of students (Komives et al., 2003). In fact, nontraditional students are the new majority on college campuses, and Komives et al. (2003) suggested dissolving the use of

nontraditional in place of an all-encompassing term such as “students” (p. 651). For the purposes of this review, I have chosen to continue to use the word “nontraditional” so that I can accurately reflect the current literature and continue to recognize the unique characteristics of this population. To eliminate the term completely may remove biases related to the words “traditional” and “nontraditional” but may risk silencing the voices of a student population instead of recognizing the value of their characteristics, experiences, and contributions to college life.

#### *Higher Education Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*

To begin to understand and empower nontraditional college students, it is first important to recognize that researchers in higher education often perceive nontraditional student characteristics and experiences to be invisible or of lower status than those of traditional students. This section discusses Donaldson and Townsend’s (2007) four classifications that illustrate how researchers in higher education perceive nontraditional student characteristics and experiences as invisible or of lower status than those of traditional students. These classifications include research that perceives nontraditional students as *invisible*, research that *acknowledges but devalues* nontraditional students, research that *accepts* nontraditional students, and research that *embraces* nontraditional students (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Examples of each frame describe the ways research hinders or empowers the nontraditional student, and this section argues that future research must begin to embrace and empower all college students by understanding their characteristics and experiences on college campuses.

#### *Absent (Invisible) Students*

The percentage of articles that include research on nontraditional students illustrates to what extent nontraditional students are absent in the literature. In their comprehensive study on discourse in academic, higher education-focused journals, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) found that only 1.27% of 3,219 articles were about nontraditional age undergraduate students. The notable absence of nontraditional

students in the higher education literature is troubling, considering that lack of appearance of a topic in journals “can denote what counts as irrelevant and insignificant in a field” (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p. 27). Nontraditional students are nearly non-existent in published research, which suggests that higher education perceives nontraditional students, and often the institutions that serve them, as less important than traditional students and institutions (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Komives et al., 2003). Higher education must increase attention to the nontraditional student, given that the majority of college and university students today are nontraditional (Compton et al., 2006; Komives et al., 2003; NCES, 2002; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). The next three classifications described in the following paragraphs illustrate perceptions of nontraditional students based on how they are discussed in research.

#### *Acknowledged but Devalued Students*

Research that defines nontraditional student experiences as deficient, problematic, different, or other, and considers traditional students as the norm and basis for studying retention, success, and the collegiate experience, fits into the *acknowledges but devalued* classification (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Both traditional and nontraditional students experience challenges in college, although literature about nontraditional students tends to focus only on deficits and “how to best address the needs of so-called underserved” (Compton et al., 2006, p. 75). Nontraditional students face challenges because of multiple roles that include family, job, finances, dissonance among roles, and systemic institutional barriers (Fairchild, 2003). Higher education’s acknowledgment of the challenges of nontraditional students may foster institutional ability to address potential barriers to nontraditional student success but fails to consider the unique characteristics and experiences of this student population.

#### *Accepted Students*

The third frame points to research that *accepts* nontraditional students, yet separates them from traditional students and uses traditional students as a basis for

comparison (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). For many years, the term “nontraditional” reflected institutional recognition of this student population, but was a comparison to what institutions identified as standard traditional characteristics of a student who is 18 to 22 years old and lives on-campus (Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983). Research in this frame may accept nontraditional students as equally important as traditional students, although the comparison serves as evidence that nontraditional experiences are atypical (Ogren, 2003). Using the nontraditional commuter student as an example, higher education literature views commuting to class as a nontraditional experience because it is different from traditional students who live in residence halls (Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983). Even at institutions with primarily nontraditional commuter students, admissions marketing materials continue to feature students as young and situated in the residential college setting (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). The assumption that off-campus living is different keeps nontraditional students, and research about them, in a frame of otherness that falls short of understanding what it means to live off-campus for a student with nontraditional characteristics (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983).

### *Embraced Students*

Researchers can address the problems created by characterizing nontraditional students as atypical by emphasizing the empowerment of these students through understanding their history and gaining more insight about how nontraditional student characteristics contribute positively to their college experience (Komives et al., 2003; Ogren 2003). Exploring the value of nontraditional students and their experiences is the key feature of the *embraced* perspective in research. One example is what is known about nontraditional community college students who are employed in low-wage work while attending school. In many cases, students have a strong student identity because this allows them a certain status in their work environment (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Unlike other research frames, the embraced perspective looks beyond the challenges of

what it means to balance employment with college life and examines how embracing college identity has positive outcomes for student success.

### *Changing Perceptions About Nontraditional Students*

The nontraditional student provides a perplexing challenge to researchers because their characteristics are so diverse (Compton et al., 2006). One reason that research is rarely conducted within the embraced framework is often lacking in studies about nontraditional students could be that researchers use quantitative research methods that do not allow them to truly understand and value the unique experiences of the nontraditional student. Lack of research continues to be symptomatic of negative perceptions about nontraditional students in higher education. Knefelkamp and Stewart (1983) suggested that researchers have excluded the nontraditional student population from research samples because their complex characteristics were problematic for research designs.

Research must address negative perceptions in the future, and should emphasize the whole experience of the nontraditional student (Andreas, 1983). The type of research that characterizes the embraced framework is essential for nontraditional student research to add depth to understanding the characteristics and experiences of nontraditional students. As nontraditional students continue to represent the majority of students enrolled in colleges and universities, research within the embraced framework will raise the status of the nontraditional student, along with higher education perceptions and priorities about how to best foster their success (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). The next sections will discuss what is known in literature and research about nontraditional student experiences related to college decisions, and life, academic, and social experiences.

### *Nontraditional Student Academic and Social Experiences*

Nontraditional students navigate a winding pathway of college experiences throughout their life cycle (Schuetze & Slowey 2002). The first phase of nontraditional

students' academic biography is their experience navigating entry routes into higher education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Nontraditional students choose two primary entry routes into college: delayed enrollment into college and college-related choice patterns (Compton et al., 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

### *Delayed Enrollment*

Nontraditional students are often older than traditional college students due to delayed entry into college. Delayed enrollment is defined as enrolling in college at least one year after high school graduation and is a primary defining characteristic of nontraditional students (Compton et al., 2006; NCES, 2002; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002) reported that the proportion of the undergraduate population that delays college enrollment has continued to increase. During the 1999-2000 school year, 46% of all undergraduates did not start college the same year they graduated from high school (NCES, 2002). Given such a high percentage of students who are delaying enrollment, it is important to understand the factors that influence this delay.

Several background characteristics influence whether a student delays enrollment into college (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Race, gender, and socioeconomic status all impact enrollment timing, and students who are Black and male with low income are more likely to delay enrollment (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Parental characteristics also influence delayed enrollment. First-generation college students and students whose parents speak a language other than English are increasingly likely to delay enrollment; other factors are low achievement test scores and no contacts with financial aid while enrolled in high school (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007).

Delayed enrollment has an impact on nontraditional student success in college. Even after considering all other factors, students who delay enrollment into college are 64% less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those who enroll immediately after high school (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Delayed enrollment also has a negative impact on



students financially and academically, with decreased financial resources and weaker academic preparation (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Nontraditional students who delay enrollment are likely to have a negative experience at institutions designed to serve 18- to 22-year-old students (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Background characteristics and the influence of delayed enrollment are sufficiently represented in the literature; however, qualitative studies are needed to explore nontraditional student experiences related to delay, both prior to and during college (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007).

### *Part-Time Enrollment*

The second aspect of the academic biography of the nontraditional student is the interaction between study and employment, domestic, and social commitments (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Bureaucratic or institutional definitions of nontraditional student patterns of study focus primarily on whether students attend full time or part time (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Nontraditional students are often defined as a population by their part-time enrollment status (Glazer-Raymo, 2009; Ishmael, 2009; Knepfelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Research infers that nontraditional students attend part time because they are “married, living off-campus, attending part time, working, and financially independent” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 222).

Little is known about nontraditional students’ intensity and commitment to academics while they are enrolled part time (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). There is more to understand about how nontraditional students experience academics while enrolled part time. Limited research available about good practices that support the nontraditional college student suggests that scheduling classes at times convenient for nontraditional students will encourage their success (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Fincher, 2001). Many nontraditional student-serving institutions use adult-oriented scheduling, distance education, and services to accommodate nontraditional students (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Because students make college decisions within situated contexts, it is probable that these institutions have policies in place that address the needs of

nontraditional students who often have limited social mobility, fewer financial means, and varied family environments (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

Although the literature describes the type of institutions comprised primarily of nontraditional students, little is known about the college students who choose to attend branch campuses. More research is needed to further understand the complexities related to part-time attendance and the ways institutional policy and structures foster or hinder nontraditional students' ability to manage their homes, families, jobs, and other life responsibilities. The next sections discuss in more detail existing research about nontraditional students' multiple life commitments, including employment, family relationships, housing, social activities, and academic integration.

### *Employment*

Many nontraditional students enter higher education with mature life experiences that include employment, family, or involvement in the community (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Multiple life commitments impact how much focus and time a student has to expend on academics and social activities on campus. Full-time employment off-campus presents a significant challenge for college students and has a negative impact on student learning and development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When a nontraditional student is employed and attends class, both priorities present a significant demand on the student's time. Tannock and Flocks (2003) noted that "pulling a double shift of work and school is difficult in even the best of circumstances" and that college environments strongly affect a student's ability to handle "the work-school one-two punch (p. 14). There are differences in success for students depending on the type of work they are doing (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Many nontraditional students are unfortunately employed at positions that are "characterized by poor, stressful, and often abusive working conditions" (Tannock & Flocks, 2003, p. 14). This type of work environment has a negative impact on a nontraditional student's ability to perform well academically (Tannock & Flocks, 2003).

There are some positive outcomes associated with nontraditional student employment. Jobs related to the field a student is studying, or jobs that do not “sap their mental energy or emotional spirits,” are less of an obstruction to student success (Tannock & Flocks, 2003). Aside from the financial benefits of working, on-campus employment is also known to have a positive impact on students. Many nontraditional students have increased access to resources, such as staff or internal information about college, that help them become familiar with college-related processes and procedures (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006).

A significant number of college students are employed while enrolled in college, including 47% of full-time and 84.5% of part-time students (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002). Given that the majority of part-time students are employed, it is clear that employment status affects a student’s course load, and many nontraditional students balance other priorities in addition to academics and employment. These students attend college while employed and raising children, sometimes as single parents (Brock, 2010).

#### *Family Relationships*

Family relationships influence nontraditional students’ transition into college and their college experiences (Wartman & Savage, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Even though 28% of college students are identified as balancing several priorities while in college, the majority of literature focused on students and families considers primarily psychological stress resulting from role conflict between student, family, and employment responsibilities (Gigliotti, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Home, 1998; Meehan & Negy, 2003; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009).

Whereas previous studies focused on the negative aspects of multiple and perceptually conflicting social roles (Christopher, 2005; Dyk, 1987; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Ricco, McCollum, & Schuyten, 2003), a more recent study examined the dual roles of mother and college student for females enrolled in college with school-age children. Ricco et al. (2009) considered the uniqueness of a mother and child who share a common

life role as students. The resulting role blending, including a mother's high expectations for her child as a student, has several positive effects on college student mothers' attitudes and experiences (Ricco et al., 2009). Because the college student mother holds high expectations for her child, she is more likely to have an intrinsic orientation as a college student, a priority of intellectual curiosity, and greater self-regulation and efficacy as a learner (Ricco et al., 2009).

The married, heterosexual undergraduate student continues to represent a significant population on campus, although there are few studies that examine their social and academic experiences while in college (Meehan & Negy, 2003). One study examined the impact of marital status on degree completion and found that nontraditional students who marry before entering college or while enrolled "have lower odds of degree completion" than college students whose marriage and college experience do not overlap (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). Married undergraduate students were found to have difficulty adjusting to college (Meehan & Negy, 2003), were less likely to engage with other students on campus, and "manifested significantly high levels of marital distress on multiple dimensions of their relationships" (Meehan & Negy, 2003, p. 688). Little is known about students who are in other types of committed relationships, including unmarried heterosexual partnerships and marriages and partnerships between same-sex couples (Meehan & Negy, 2003).

### *Living Off Campus*

Students who balance multiple priorities of employment and family are likely to live off-campus (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). In 1982, Rue and Stewart reported that commuter students comprised 80% of undergraduates in college. For many nontraditional students, the college experience involved commuting to campus, parking, interacting with faculty, and interacting with campus physical spaces and support services (Andreas, 1983). Students who commute to and from campus with no social connections or involvement are at increased risk for attrition (Astin, 1993). For nontraditional and

commuter students who are employed, learning is not hindered if they are engaged in social experiences while enrolled in college (Lundberg, 2003).

#### *Activities On Campus*

Student involvement in campus academic and social activities eases the transition into college for both traditional and nontraditional students (Perna, 2005). Peer interaction and involvement are also important factors that impact the nontraditional student's adjustment to college. Shared activities, courses in common with peers, and other support systems are a few examples of support mechanisms that are especially critical for the success of nontraditional students (Lucas & Robinson, 2001; Lundberg, 2003). Implied in the lack of research on nontraditional social experiences is that students are so divided in their life responsibilities that on-campus social experiences are not a priority. The literature points to social integration as a predictor for student success, but more information is needed about the ways student experiences and multiple life roles foster or hinder nontraditional student interaction and engagement in college.

#### *Academic Integration*

Academic integration is a critical factor for nontraditional student success and may be more important for employed students with lower socio-economic status (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). One-third of all academic studies on nontraditional students and academics have focused on factors that affect student retention, and the majority of those studies examined "factors that work against retention or academic success of adult students" (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p. 34). Fewer studies have examined the academic needs of nontraditional students. Many of these studies examined the developmental needs of adult students from age and gender perspectives and recommended academic and student services for accommodation (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Glover, 2000; Terrell, 1990). Developmental or remedial education is common at most American colleges and universities, and more than 40% of nontraditional students take at least one remedial course while enrolled in college

(Woodham, 1998, as cited in Attewell, Lavin, Thurston, & Levey, 2006). Most remedial students are over age 20 and are delayed entrants to college (Attewell et al., 2006).

A limited number of studies have been conducted that focus on nontraditional students' classroom behavior and perceptions (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Weaver and Qi (2005) examined nontraditional student classroom behavior and participation and found that older, nontraditional students "are more likely to assume responsibility for classroom discussion and participation" (p. 577). Weaver and Qi (2005) also found that nontraditional students are more likely than traditional students to assume primary responsibility for their own participation in class, meaning that they are less likely to conform to peer normative pressures.

Lack of literature on nontraditional students indicates a substantial bias in higher education research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). There is also a bias within research about nontraditional students. The purpose of higher education is to educate, and at the core of that mission is the academic experience. However, most of the research about nontraditional students considers primarily social experiences such as employment and family. Researchers must also begin to frame the nontraditional student experience as academic and explore which experiences foster and hinder their academic success.

### *Student Theory*

Nontraditional students face several choices, experience times of adjustment and transition, and make decisions about involvement in academic and social experiences based on their multiple life roles during their undergraduate careers (Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Tinto, 1987). This section applies student development theories, student success theories, and the thriving quotient to frame nontraditional college student experiences. There are limitations to each of these theoretical frameworks because they consider primarily the impact of identity and involvement on traditional college student retention and graduation. However,

considering multiple theories as a framework is useful to consider the whole experience of college students (Baxter-Magolda, 2009).

### *Student Development Theories*

Psychosocial theorists have examined how adults construct their sense of self (Baxter-Magolda, 2009). According to Erickson (1959), “development occurs within a series of age-linked, sequential stages that arise during each individual’s lifetime” (Erickson, 1959, as cited in Komives et al., 2003, p. 180). Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified seven vectors of development that students follow during their college experience: developing competence, managing emotions, becoming independent, developing mature relationships, establishing identity, clarifying purpose, and developing integrity. Chickering and Reisser’s vectors described a linear path that students move along, at different rates, during their college experience (1993). Life course perspectives focus on the social roles of individuals throughout their lifespan. Life course theorists pose that life course is socially constructed by individuals based on beliefs people hold about roles they assume. For nontraditional students who balance multiple life roles as parents, workers, and college students, this perspective considers that individuals make choices to deal with various life events.

Identity development is a lifelong task through which individuals develop a sense of self, who they are, and who they want to become (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). According to Sanford, identity development is the process of becoming more complex in one’s personal and social identities (Sanford, 1967, as cited in Komives et al., 2003). Identity development may be an appropriate theoretical frame for nontraditional students because it considers multiple social identities, capturing the breadth of nontraditional student background characteristics. Weber (2001) described social identities including race, gender, class, and sexuality as complex systems and patterns that are intricate and connective. These characteristics benefit some individuals and harm or restrict others (Weber, 2001).

Multiple identity development also addresses the ways individuals consider and negotiate their multiple identities (Komives et al., 2003). According to Jones and McEwen (2000), a person's multiple social identities include contexts such as family, socio-cultural conditions, career decisions, and life planning (Jones & McEwen, 2000, as cited in Komives et al., 2003). The core of student identity includes personal characteristics influenced by intersections of multiple identities, and the salience of that influence can vary based on how connected each role is at a given time (Komives et al., 2003). Because the social identities of nontraditional students are interconnected and complex, theorists such as Weber (2001) argued that these identities cannot be separated and should be understood as a collective identity

#### *Student Success Theory*

Nontraditional students have varied goals and intentions related to their enrollment, academic, and social experiences (Braxton, 2003). Enrollment goals are focused on the reason a student attends college; academic goals relate to achievement in coursework, critical thinking skills, and study; and social goals focus on personal relationships (Braxton, 2003). For students who intend to succeed in college, it is important for college personnel to understand what experiences or factors contribute to their success and the barriers that may prevent students from accomplishing their goals.

Students enter college with different background characteristics, skills, and dispositions, and have varied intentions for college attendance and personal growth (Tinto, 1987). Students who are able to effectively adapt to college within social and academic environments are more likely to persist, succeed, and earn a college degree (Tinto, 1993). Virtually all students experience some difficulty in the transition to college (Tinto, 1987). "Initial attendance at a two-year versus a four-year institution reduces the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion by 15 to 20 percent" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 376). Most student departure is a personal choice during the first year of attendance and is not due to academic dismissal (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's



interactionist theory of college student departure is widely recognized for its validity in finding that student retention is a consequence of interacting with the college organization at formal and informal levels while students are enrolled in college (Braxton, 2003).

Tinto's emphasis on on-campus environments that foster or facilitate involvement implies that nontraditional students who live off campus may face unique challenges compared to their traditional peers (1987). Tinto acknowledged nontraditional students who live off campus and suggested that institutions designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students, such as community colleges, should not avoid attempting to encourage student participation in social and academic life if students live off campus (Tinto, 1987). Institutions must also be mindful of the benefits of peer interaction; college students who engage with peers and others who are external to their college experience face additional challenges while in college (Tinto, 1987). The fact that so many nontraditional students balance multiple life responsibilities that include external family responsibilities indicates a need to understand how students experience college while they are also parents, partners, and spouses.

Tinto's stages of passage through student college careers expand on concepts of engagement and examine the ways students separate from their past, transition to college, and incorporate into college society (Tinto, 1987). The first stage of college requires students to disconnect from membership in past social communities (Tinto, 1987). Because nontraditional students have already disassociated with past affiliations, they may "avoid some of the stresses of separation" (Tinto, 1987, p. 97). The second stage involves student transition from high school to college. Tinto suggested that research about this stage should consider the context to which nontraditional college students may have transitioned to some degree prior to entry into college (1993). Although most students experience difficulty making the transition to college, the important consideration with regard to all students is their response to the stress of transition (Tinto,

1993). Multiple life roles may potentially help or hinder students' ability to manage the stress of college transition. The final stage of Tinto's interactionist theory is student incorporation into the society of college (Tinto, 1993). During this stage, the college student finds and adopts new associations that are appropriate within the college setting (Tinto, 1993). Connections with peers, faculty, and others on campus may be challenging for students who seek to make their way through the maze of institutional life (Tinto, 1993). For institutions that depend on residential and on-campus experiences, nontraditional students with multiple life priorities and residence off-campus may not experience a forum to engage with faculty and peers beyond scheduled class time.

### *Student Thriving Quotient*

The theories presented thus far are primarily useful to understand college psychosocial development, identity development, student engagement, and college transition. As mentioned earlier, there are limitations to each of these theoretical frameworks because they consider primarily traditional college student experiences. Tinto (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) each stated that their research was primarily focused on the experience of traditional age, residential college students. These two limitations also present college personnel with two challenges. First, judgments about success of the college student experience cannot be based only on whether a student graduates (Schreiner, 2010.) Second, researchers must be cautious with their assumptions that theory applicable to homogeneous groups of traditional students can be generalized to the characteristics and backgrounds of nontraditional students (Compton et al., 2006; Patton, 1990). One theory, psychological well-being, expands on current student development theory to explore the effects of well-being as it relates to student success (Bowman, 2010; Schreiner, 2010).

Psychological well-being involves the concept of an individual who positively functions in a way that promotes autonomy, mastering the environment, seeking personal growth opportunities, maintaining positive relations with others, having a sense of

purpose in life, and accepting and thinking positively about oneself (Bowman, 2010; Ryff, 1989). The psychological well-being perspective provides a framework for researchers to move beyond the simple question of whether a student succeeds by graduating. The next paragraphs will describe how psychological well-being informs understanding about the experiences of students from a holistic perspective, and also allows the researcher to cast a wide net and consider how students thrive while they are in college.

Although previously focused on children and older adults, psychological well-being theory, when applied to college student perceptions and experiences, allows the researcher to empirically examine the ways students flourish and thrive while they are in college (Schreiner, 2010). Schreiner (2010) conducted interviews and focus groups to develop a reliable instrument to measure thriving and found that thriving was a “distinct construct comprised of engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness” (p. 4). Schreiner also found that these factors represented elements of individual thriving that were applicable across different groups of students, “rather than a fixed personality trait over which we have little control” (2010, p. 6). The thriving quotient, and its ability to span multiple student populations and explore experiences beyond whether students graduate, was linked to student success outcomes even more than to differences in student backgrounds before entering college (Schreiner, 2010). These positive outcomes included students connecting to others on campus in meaningful ways, higher academic achievement, reported levels of institutional fit, and intention to graduate (Schreiner, 2010).

Students who thrive in college have “a positive perspective on life” and the ability to adapt to challenging situations (Schreiner, 2010, p. 6). They have a greater ability to develop long-term plans and goals, to envision their future, and to understand that they must take steps to achieve their goals (Schreiner, 2010). Although Schreiner (2010) stated that some individuals are born “optimistic,” she emphasized that college personnel

can equip students with optimism, help them envision success, and teach students to develop and apply their strengths.

The thriving quotient as a complement to psychosocial development, student development, and student success allows college personnel to focus on a thriving experience that encourages “healthy relationships, sense of community, making a contribution, and proactively coping with life’s challenges” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 10). The thriving quotient is relevant to all college students because it is not contingent on stages of life development, and may be the theoretical model most appropriate and sensitive to the experience of individuals as it relates to their unique, multiple identities and responsibilities, the ways they navigate college, and how they engage in academic and social experiences.

#### *Summary*

This literature review examined the limited research conducted on nontraditional college students and argued that current literature reflects negative perceptions of college students who experience college differently from residential students who attend traditional four-year institutions. This literature review also argued that existing research comparing traditional and nontraditional college experiences considers mostly the deficits, risks, and challenges for a population of students who have emerged as the majority on college campuses. Finally, this literature review revealed what little is actually known about the experiences of college students who attend institutions with missions to serve students defined as nontraditional.

Previous research, and lack of research about nontraditional students, confirms the need to better understand and reframe the experiences of nontraditional students in a way that represents both the challenges and the benefits of their academic and social experiences. A failure of existing research is that it continues to perpetuate negative perceptions about nontraditional students by comparing them to traditional students and by focusing on their comparative deficits. Student development and student success

theories acknowledge that they may not adequately represent the nontraditional student experience, and psychosocial theories such as the thriving quotient do not rely on life stage development and outcomes contingent upon traditional college experiences. Further exploration of whether these three theories are applicable to nontraditional student experiences is needed.

The next chapter will discuss the research methodology of this study that seeks to shed light on the ways college personnel can meet the needs and represent the voices of college students previously ignored by research, foster positive perceptions about nontraditional students and their experiences, and emphasize the whole life experience of students with multiple life priorities.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this case study was to examine nontraditional undergraduate student experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the United States Midwest. Pascarella (2006) called for expansion of student affairs inquiry that includes nontraditional students and nontraditional institutions. This case study considered branch campus undergraduate students' experiences through an analysis of their own words. This case study was designed to examine branch campus academic and social experiences and was guided by the following research question: How do nontraditional undergraduate college students experience academics and social activities while enrolled in a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest?

This chapter describes the applicability of case study research design to this study; epistemological context and researcher subjectivity as it informed this study; research sample, data collection methods, data analysis and synthesis; and considerations including issues of research quality, ethics, and study limitations.

#### *Case Study Design and Qualitative Methods*

I used the case study approach to investigate nontraditional student academic and social experiences at a branch campus. The case study is an inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). In contrast to previous studies designed to define students by their quantifiable demographic characteristics and to predict and compare success and failure to students with traditional background characteristics, I chose to examine six undergraduate students' academic and social experiences situated within the context of the branch campus environment. Most students enrolled at branch campuses possess nontraditional characteristics, and this environmental context allowed me as a researcher to explain,

illustrate, describe, and contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of college students with nontraditional characteristics.

I selected multiple undergraduate student participants who attended the branch campus as subjects for this study, and employed qualitative methods to collect analyze data. I selected qualitative methods because this approach allowed me to study participants within the context of their experiences as college students at a branch campus, allowed me to gather data so that I could include meaning and discover new understanding about nontraditional student experiences, and because I was interested in knowing more about how students construct meaning about their academic and social experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994 and Merriam, 1998).

#### *Epistemological Context and Researcher Subjectivity*

Epistemological beliefs are a ways of understanding and explaining how we know, and also what we know (Crotty, 1998). Researcher subjectivity is the awareness of researcher bias and influence. This section describes four elements of constructivism as presented by Grbich (2007) as the epistemological context and rationale for this study, and also a statement about my self-awareness as it informs my approach to this study.

The constructivist perspective guided my approach to this research study because I explored of the way students interpret, make meaning, and respond to their academic and social experiences. I selected this framework to understand the realities and experiences of branch campus students in an effort to identify issues related to their experience. The constructivist framework enables research that acknowledges multiple realities (Grbich, 2007), which was important for this study that examined holistically nontraditional student experiences and included my interpretation as a researcher as I constructed and imposed interpretations derived from my own life experiences.

The personal nature of constructivism calls for individual constructions that result from interaction between the investigator and respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this study, this personal interaction occurred during an interview dialogue.

Because of this interaction between the respondents and the researcher, I maintained awareness about my own subjectivity to recognize the potential to use my background and experiences to the benefit of the study and to remain cautious about potential biases to my research design and analysis. The next paragraph describes key aspects of my background as they relate to the study of nontraditional branch campus students.

I am employed in a leadership role Western Illinois University - Quad Cities, a campus that serves a high proportion of nontraditional students. Although I have minimal interaction with students, I considered throughout the study any assumptions or biases I had based on my professional experiences. For example, although I am employed on a campus that serves nontraditional students, my own navigation through college as an undergraduate student was one that mixed traditional and nontraditional experiences. I transferred three times between two four-year institutions and a community college. These personal college experiences, along with my current employment at a branch campus, afforded me the opportunity to have experienced both a traditional residential college and a nontraditional institution. Although I attended a community college, I was aware as a researcher that as an undergraduate student, I valued my experiences on traditional campuses more than my experience at a nonresidential campus. I also received messages that attending a traditional four-year institution was the most desirable educational path, and continue to be aware of this bias when I encounter in my professional life institutional policies or assumptions geared toward the traditional college student experience.

To maintain awareness and sensitivity about the influences of my perspectives and experiences, I gathered perspectives of another individual to audit my research process and findings to ensure that my perspectives were a tool and not a hindrance to this research. Although there was potential for bias, my experiences had a positive benefit for this study. Because of my own experiences and observations of the students at Western Illinois University - Quad Cities, I recognized the limitations of previous



research and opportunity to more thoroughly and accurately reflect nontraditional academic and social experiences. I knew that through my own experiences and those of students I recognized value in their experiences, and recognized that the case study would allow me to better examine student experiences without the context of comparing them to traditional students. I was able to formulate interview questions that were based in literature and theory, that I also knew through my experiences would illicit thorough responses by students. I was also able to analyze data in a way that reflected understanding about navigating nontraditional pathways through college.

Inquiry informed by a constructivist framework enabled me to answer my research question through the words of undergraduate branch campus students. Elements of the case study research design allowed me as a researcher to link data to the purpose of this study, link data to research questions, and establish criteria to interpret findings (Yin, 2009). In the next sections, I will describe the implementation of this study, beginning with a discussion about the selected research site and context.

#### *Research Site and Context*

The site I selected for this study was Western Illinois University - Quad Cities, (WIU Quad Cities), a branch campus located in the Quad Cities metropolitan area that spans the border of Illinois and Iowa and has a population of about 376,000. Located 90 miles from the main campus of Western Illinois University, the Quad Cities campus serves over 1,300 students and offers 14 undergraduate majors, 13 master's degree programs, 5 graduate certificate programs, and one doctoral program. At the time of this study, WIU Quad Cities was housed in one 60,000 square foot building that included faculty and staff offices, 18 classrooms, and academic support facilities such as a library, computer lab, and writing center.

The Quad Cities area is host to a Fortune 500 world headquarters, industry, and a major military installation. WIU Quad Cities is the first public, four-year institution to offer degree programs in the Quad Cities. The Quad Cities area is known for its poverty.

In the county that comprises the Illinois Quad Cities, residents earn only 81.8% of the state's median income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Although there are two private, liberal arts institutions based in the Quad Cities, only 17% of the population holds a baccalaureate degree compared to the state average of 26% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Prior to the establishment of the WIU Quad Cities campus, the community was one of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States without a public four-year college or university. As a whole, the Quad Cities region is under-represented in the number of individuals with bachelor's degrees. The Quad Cities has an estimated 32,123 individuals, or 7.2% of the population age 25 and over, with two-year associate's degrees.

This section described the WIU Quad Cities campus and its host community as the context for this study. WIU Quad Cities is a branch campus situated to provide educational opportunities to a new population of students in the region it serves. Similar to most branch campuses, WIU Quad Cities serves a high proportion of college students with nontraditional patterns of college attendance and background characteristics. The next section describes the typical student demographic at WIU Quad Cities and identifies this group of students as an appropriate sample for this study about branch campus student experiences.

### *The Research Sample*

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) suggested the inclusion of a purposeful sample of individuals who can best answer questions about the study. Purposeful sampling seeks to identify information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Information-rich cases are those from which a researcher can learn a great deal about issues that are central to the purpose of research (Patton, 1990). In this section, I describe the sampling strategy that I used for this study, illustrate the profile of a WIU Quad Cities student, and discuss how I selected participants for interviews.

### *The WIU Quad Cities Student*

A primary goal of sampling is to select participants who will be able to answer questions related to the purpose of the study. Because this study was conducted as a case study of nontraditional undergraduate students at the branch campus WIU Quad Cities, I accessed several resources to confirm that the student profile included nontraditional characteristics and backgrounds. These resources available on the public domain were the *Western Illinois University 2010 Fact Book (Fact Book)*, the *Western Illinois University - Quad Cities Fall 2010 Student Survey (Student Survey)*, and the *Western Illinois University-Quad Cities Child Care Feasibility Study (Childcare Study)*.

The *Western Illinois University 2010 Fact Book* contains institutional data representative of all enrolled WIU Quad Cities students. The *Fact Book* is a compilation of institutional data that reports WIU Quad Cities student profile information, including sex, age, enrollment status, and ethnicity. According to the *Fact Book*, women represent 60% of all undergraduate students at WIU Quad Cities (Western Illinois University, 2010). The average age for all WIU Quad Cities undergraduate students is 29 years, and 78% of all students who are women are older than 22 years (Western Illinois University, 2010).

The *Student Survey* provides additional information about students that the institutional *Fact Book* does not examine, including reasons for attending the WIU Quad Cities and employment status. The Student Survey included responses from 28% of all WIU Quad Cities students and revealed that almost 71% of female respondents chose WIU Quad Cities because it was “close to home” (WIU Quad Cities, 2010a). This may be related to the fact that 79% of respondents indicated they maintained at least part-time employment, including that 77% of all full-time students had a job in addition to taking classes (WIU Quad Cities, 2010a).

The *Childcare Study* provides insight about the families of WIU Quad Cities' students, including information about the number of students with dependent children.

For the 103 students who answered the survey, 89% had children, and 30% of women with children indicated that they had missed class because they could not locate childcare (WIU Quad Cities, 2010b). Although the nature of the survey was an inquiry into interest in providing childcare on campus and respondents were able to self-select, the number of responses represented a significant proportion of WIU Quad Cities' students.

#### *Participant Selection Strategy*

As suggested by Yin (2009), researchers should establish criteria to screen candidates for participation in a case study. I chose to interview undergraduate students who were female, over 22 years of age, employed at least part time; had at least one dependent child; and lived within a 30-minute radius of the WIU Quad Cities campus. I selected participants from this profile to maintain consistency with current definitions of nontraditional students and with the WIU Quad Cities campus profile data.

I solicited the assistance of WIU Quad Cities' faculty to nominate participants for this study, because I knew that the faculty had contact with students in the classroom. I asked faculty to invite students in their classes who matched the WIU Quad Cities student profile to contact me about their interest in participating in this study. Ten students contacted me and indicated their interest, and I confirmed that their demographic information matched the profile and also collected additional demographic information about their race and whether their parents attended college on a demographic information form prior to the interview. The total number of six participants yielded rich, thorough, and descriptive accounts of each participant's experience and subsequently no additional participants were included in the study. Table 1 lists the participants and their characteristics.

#### *Data Collection*

I describe in this section the data collection protocol and procedures that I employed in this research study. The protocol was guided by case study research design

as discussed by Yin (2009) and included an overview of the project, explanation of field procedures, case study interview questions, and use of artifacts for triangulation.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	“Pam”	“Serena”	“Lori”	“Ashley”	“Tia”	“Teresa”
Age	49	26	29	23	32	44
Race	White	African American	White	White	Hispanic	White
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
1st Generation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Children	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Undergraduate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Employed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lives within 30 miles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

This study sought to address the research question: How do nontraditional undergraduate college students experience academics and social activities while enrolled in a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest? As mentioned earlier, this population of students is not adequately represented in the literature, and when they have been discussed, they have been viewed in comparison and in deficit to traditional students who attend traditional four-year residential institutions (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Through its data collection methods, this study was designed to represent the academic and social experiences of undergraduate students at a branch campus. By collecting data at a branch campus, this study aimed to better understand the academic and social experiences of branch campus students with nontraditional characteristics who attend college while maintaining other life priorities such as jobs and family relationships. Interviews and collection of physical artifacts provided an opportunity for me as a researcher to document nontraditional academic and social experiences. The next

paragraphs discuss the rationale, benefits, and protocol for each of these data collection elements.

### *Interviews*

For this study, I collected data from student responses to interview questions designed to answer the research question: “How do nontraditional undergraduate college students experience academics and social activities while enrolled in a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest?” Interviews were an appropriate means of data collection because, as suggested by Rossman and Rallis (2003), they enabled me to understand student perspectives, probe and clarify responses, generate descriptive data, and gather insights and context around participants’ college experiences. Interviews were targeted and focused directly on the case study topic, and student responses provided inferences and explanations that were descriptive and provided inferences and explanations (Yin, 2009).

An interview protocol was implemented to ensure consistency, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995) and included 10 questions that I asked during interviews (see Appendix A). The interview questions reflected current literature and theory about nontraditional students, and sought to gain responses about their experiences with delayed enrollment, mode of study, academic integration, social activities, multiple life roles, living off campus, and employment.

The following open-ended interview questions aimed to understand how the participating students experienced academics while enrolled in college.

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your life experiences since high school. What path did you follow before you came to WIU Quad Cities?
2. Do you attend college full time or part time? What factors played a part in your decision to attend full time or part time?
3. Please tell me about your experiences with academics at WIU Quad Cities.
4. What do you like about taking college courses? Please explain what you do not like about college courses.

5. What do you know now about academics that you wish you had known prior to becoming a student?
6. What else would you like me to know about your academic experiences at WIU Quad Cities?

Social experiences were student experiences that included interpersonal relationships with friends and family both on and off campus. Social experiences also included living circumstances, possible employment, and other situations that required personal interaction with others. The following open-ended interview questions aimed to understand how the participants experienced social relationships and activities while enrolled in college.

7. Please describe a typical day when you are on campus, but not in class. How do you spend your time? How has that changed or stayed the same during your time as a student?
8. Please describe a typical day when you are off campus. How do you spend your time? How has that changed or stayed the same during your time as a student?
9. What advice would you offer to a new student who has a similar background and experiences as your own?
10. What else should I know about your academic and social experiences that will help me understand your experiences as a student at WIU Quad Cities? What advice would you give a new WIU Quad Cities student?

Focused interviews took place in a private office on campus to facilitate student comfort and so that students would feel at ease to answer the questions. The focused interview discussed by Yin (2009) occurs over a relatively short period of time and includes an open-ended, conversational set of questions designed to gain insight about the study's research question. The interview included questions about why students chose to attend WIU Quad Cities and asked them to describe what they experienced in a typical

day. I also asked students to talk about their experiences with academics, social experiences on campus, and social experiences off campus. The following paragraphs describe the rationale for selected interview questions, followed by specific interview questions that I asked within the included protocol.

Prior to the start of an interview, I provided each participant an informed consent information and participation agreement so that participants were aware of the scope of the study, their rights, their risks, and the benefits of the study. Each student read, indicated verbally that she understood all aspects of the study, and signed the form. Informed consent is discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

I used interview questions designed to elicit responses from students about their experiences with academic and social experiences on and off campus. I also used follow-up questions that expanded on the protocol questions when I required more information or sought deeper meaning or explanation following a respondent's initial answer. As suggested by Williamson (2006), I piloted each question prior to finalizing the interview question protocol. Piloting ensured that questions would generate the type of data needed to answer the research question. Following the pilot, I found that the student volunteer understood the meaning of the questions and responded with great detail and depth. I identified one overlap question, so I eliminated that question from the interview script. I did not use the pilot responses as part of the data for this study. The following paragraphs describe the rationale for the final list of interview questions, followed by specific interview questions that I asked within the included protocol.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the interview recordings using Microsoft Word. I referred to field notes for clarification as needed. To conclude the initial interview, I invited the student to return for a follow-up interview and also invited the student to bring any physical artifacts to the follow-up interview that illustrated the experiences described in the interview. Collection of artifacts is discussed in the next section, including the rationale for use and the observation plan.



### *Collection of Artifacts*

Employing a second method of data collection results in the ability to triangulate and validate collected data (Yin, 2009). Data collected from interviews may include responses that rely on participant recall. To address this potential bias of the study, I collected physical artifacts from each participant that illustrated both academic and social experiences as a college student, employee, and parent of dependent children. As indicated by Yin (2009), this approach allows the researcher to make observations about participant experiences outside the context of the interview. The next paragraph describes the steps that were conducted to obtain physical artifacts.

I asked student participants to share with me any artifacts from their typical day that reflected their academic or social experiences. These physical artifacts added additional context to the study and allowed me to “develop a broader perspective” about the case as suggested by Yin (2009, p. 113). In addition to artifacts provided by the students, I collected campus newspapers and an article from the local newspaper. Each of these items provided further context for the academic and social life of WIU Quad Cities' students and confirmed findings from the interviews. Three participants brought artifacts to discuss, including a pen, a class schedule, and a child of a participant as examples of something or someone that kept them motivated and inspired. The local newspaper highlighted a story about a new program at WIU Quad Cities for working adults, and the campus newspaper featured stories about available on-campus activities. The next section describes analysis and synthesis of collected data.

### *Data Analysis and Synthesis*

This section addresses the steps I took to organize, analyze, synthesize, and interpret collected data. I transcribed the digital interview recordings and saved the text within organized electronic files using Microsoft Word. In preparation for analysis, I color-coded each respondent's transcript text with a unique font color so that I would be

able to track respondent identity as I manipulated and sorted data. The final results of each round of data analysis are available in Appendix D.

The first step of analysis was to begin manipulating data to generate categories that reflected the themes I identified within the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using Word, I began to separate respondents' words from the original transcript into stand-alone units of meaning, as suggested by Dey (1999). I then copied these units of meaning into Microsoft Excel workbook. I chose to use Microsoft Excel to display my data in a matrix as prescribed by Yin (2009) because I am an experienced user of this software and felt that my experience would optimize my ability to manipulate and sort data as themes and categories emerged.

I used ten separate spreadsheets within the Excel workbook to identify the content from each of the ten interview questions. I copied stand-alone units of text from the original transcript and inserted them into a cell within a row in the spreadsheet. For each unit, I assigned a descriptive word or phrase that summarized the meaning of each unit and placed it within the same row next to the original text. As I continued to do this, I began to determine that some units shared the same meaning and so I assigned the same descriptor. For unique units, I assigned a new descriptor. After I included all transcript units and their descriptors onto the spreadsheet tab, I sorted these alphabetically so that like items appeared next to each other. After I did this initial sort, I compared and contrasted the descriptors I assigned, and identified initial themes within the data. I assigned a unique color fill to each of the ten spreadsheets, in addition to maintaining the identifying font colors so that I could continue to know which question and which participant to attribute the data as I continued my analysis.

For the second round of analysis, I combined the content from all ten tabs into one spreadsheet. The purpose of this round of analysis was to begin to identify common themes across all ten questions. Because I had assigned descriptive labels for units of text within all ten tabs, after I consolidated content into one spreadsheet, I then

alphabetically resorted again so that like descriptors were clustered. At this point I continued my efforts to compare and contrast units, and assign and refine descriptors that reflected their meaning. After the second round of analysis I identified 15 themes and for each theme, varied numbers of categories that provided further description of common elements within each theme.

After this second round of analysis, I considered emergent theme and category relevance by tabulating frequency of events to determine how often each theme and category occurred, as suggested by Yin (2009). I did this by calculating the frequency of categories within themes, the number of sub-categories, number of participants, and number of interview question responses included in each theme. I collapsed some less frequently occurring categories within other themes where they fit. I also considered whether categories and subcategories lower frequency had significant meaning within the context of the research question. When those items were significant to the research question, I maintained them as categories or subcategories within themes. I also calculated how many participants were represented in themes, categories, and subcategories. After I determined that the frequency of units under themes, categories, and subcategories was unbalanced, and that not all participants were equally represented in all themes, categories, and subcategories, I decided to solicit another perspective and engage in further analysis.

I received input from a reviewer that there appeared to be a common thread of chronologically sequenced events for all participants. Based on that input, I continued to develop my interpretations of the data to capture the essence of participants' academic and social experiences. A major goal of the case study analysis is to build an explanation about the case (Yin, 2009). As I organized the data according to chronological sequences, I revised, combined, and renamed themes, categories, and subcategories. Frequency of items under each theme and sub-category were more balanced than the previous round of analysis, as represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Events

	<u>Themes / Categories</u>	Frequency	#Categories	#Sub-categories	#Participants	Questions
<b>1</b>	<b><u>Student background and prior experiences</u></b>	<b>110</b>	<b>2</b>			<b>1,2,3,4,5,9,10</b>
a	Life Experiences	62		4	6	
	High school	8				
	Family	22				
	Employment	32				
b	Community College Experiences	48		2	6	
	Attendance	24				
	Stopping-out	19				
<b>2</b>	<b><u>Student transition experiences</u></b>	<b>145</b>	<b>3</b>			<b>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</b>
a	Discovering Options	45		4	6	
	Choosing a major	26				
	New awareness	11				
	Decision to attend full-time	13				
	Paying for college	5				
b	Balancing Multiple Priorities	100		5	6	
	Employment	32				
	Family responsibilities	33				
	Distraction	8				
	Support	5				
	Priorities	22				
<b>3</b>	<b><u>Student engagement experiences</u></b>	<b>308</b>	<b>3</b>			<b>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</b>
a	Campus Environment	109		2	6	
	Nontraditional campus	71				
	Campus characteristics	21				
	Time on campus	17				
b	Social Interaction	96		4	6	
	Interactions with peers	37				
	Interactions with faculty	40				
	Social activities	19				
c	Academic Experiences	103		6	6	
	Course assignments	20				
	Engaged learning	24				

Table 2 (continued)

	Class format	37			
	Feelings about classes	22			
<b>4</b>	<b><u>Student motivation experiences</u></b>	<b>212</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</b>
a	Extrinsic Motivation	94		4	6
	Career	26			
	Other people	68			
	Grades	7			
b	Intrinsic Motivation	70		4	6
	Self-reliance	15			
	Personal enjoyment	7			
	Finishing	48			
c	Advice to Others	48		2	6
	College advice	28			
	Follow your dream	20			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>775</b>			

When I discovered that all respondents were represented in all themes, that a majority of respondents were represented in categories, and that students shared significant detail and depth of experience in each of the categories, I felt that the themes and categories were identified in a way that provided an illustrative and meaningful picture of undergraduate student experiences.

At this point in my analysis I solicited the perspective of an auditor with professional experience on a branch campus and familiarity with nontraditional college students to review my analysis to ensure that I had accurately interpreted the data. I provided the auditor with background for my study and shared the steps I took to sort and analyze data. I invited the auditor to review whether she agreed or disagreed with how I had interpreted data based on the original units of data. For each unit of data, the auditor indicated that she agreed or disagreed with the assigned themes and categories. I used an inter-coder check as prescribed by Miles and Huberman (2002):

Reliability =  $\frac{\text{Number of agreements}}{\text{Total number of agreements + disagreements}}$

Total number of agreements + disagreements

The auditor found that she agreed with 94% of the themes I had identified for each unit of data. Inter-coder reliability is evidence for research objectivity and quality (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991; Neuendorf, 2002).

### *Quality in Research Design*

Standards of practice for qualitative research were employed to ensure rigor in this qualitative research study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggested that the quality and trustworthiness of a qualitative research project entail conforming to standards for acceptable and competent practice and meeting standards for ethical conduct. This section discusses how I addressed quality within this study.

First, I used multiple sources of evidence. This study included interviews with multiple participants as one method of gathering multiple evidence sources. As described earlier, I collected participant-provided artifacts, and newspaper articles provided additional sources of evidence to triangulate and verify data produced by interviews with real time observations of participants during their typical day. Second, I established a chain of evidence as I collected and analyzed data. I electronically documented all aspects of this study and maintained records of all data collected and all steps taken within the research design.

Next, I ensured the credibility of this study by conducting appropriately timed member checks to review emergent constructions and to determine whether results of the data were plausible (Merriam, 1998). Member checks involved the opportunity for interview participants to provide input about the accuracy of transcripts, coding, and results of the study (Merriam, 1998). All participants confirmed that transcripts accurately reflected their words.

As mentioned earlier, I also solicited the input of an auditor to also address the dependability of this study. I maintained an audit trail that included electronic documentation of materials and choices related to the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As discussed earlier in this chapter, I implemented a data collection protocol for interviews and documented each stage of the process as it unfolded by saving each version of the Excel workbook as I proceeded through each round of analysis.

This section discussed the steps I implemented to organize, analyze, synthesize, and interpret data. To increase the quality of research design, a researcher must address issues of dependability and trustworthiness (Yin, 2009). The next section discusses ethical issues and study limitations.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

I conducted an ethical study by maintaining confidentiality of respondent identity, response content, and records through secure storage of research records and data as suggested by Patton (1990) and Yin (2009). I obtained informed consent forms prior to conducting interviews and collecting physical artifacts, and I informed participants of the associated risks and benefits of participating in the study (Patton, 1990).

#### *Limitations*

There are a few limitations to case study designs, including the inability to statistically generalize results, possible interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, and researcher subjectivity. Because I conducted this study on one branch campus, the results are relevant to the experience of the interview participants and may not represent the experiences of other students or other institutions. It should also be noted that I conducted this study at a branch campus in the Midwest. A similar study conducted at a campus elsewhere may or may not produce significantly different results.

Faculty recommended students for participation in the study; therefore, respondent participation reflects a sample of students who made some effort to connect with faculty and participated to the degree that faculty were aware of whether students fit

a profile that included their age, employment, and whether they had dependent children. This connection may or may not have indicated a higher level of engagement than a student who has not self-identified with these characteristics.

There are also a few limitations to this study because of the selected methods for data collection. According to Yin (2009), interviews can result in participant response bias to research questions, inaccuracies due to poor recall, and answering questions based on what the participant thinks the interviewer wants to hear. A limitation of physical artifact collection is that items presented by participants are selective and based on availability (Yin, 2009).

Finally, I discussed possible influences on my subjectivity as a researcher earlier in this chapter. My personal characteristics and background informed the way I interpreted and analyzed findings. Although I made every effort to ensure that I accurately represented student responses, I continually recognized and acknowledged this subjectivity as it related to interpretations and analysis throughout my data collection and analysis.

#### *Summary*

This chapter described the purpose of this study designed to examine undergraduate student experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus, WIU Quad Cities. I provided a rationale for the case study research design, defined the research sample, and described the research methods I used to collect and analyze data. Finally, I discussed how I addressed issues of quality and ethics within the study and concluded with a discussion about the limitations of this research design. The next chapter will discuss research findings of this study as a result of this implemented research study.



## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to examine undergraduate college student experiences with academic and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest, WIU Quad Cities. This section discusses research findings within the context of the four identified themes of Student Background and Prior Life Experience, Student Transition, Student Engagement, and Student Motivation and Attitude. Research about undergraduate college student experiences in an environment where nontraditional backgrounds and characteristics are typical will provide higher education and student affairs professionals with more descriptive data to make informed decisions about institutional policy, practices, and services for college students.

While I assigned pseudonyms to protect the identity of study participants, all other data are direct quotes that maintain original meaning and words as expressed by participants. This chapter includes actual interview responses by participants to illustrate participants' college-related academic and social experiences.

#### *Student Background and Prior Experiences*

All student participants discussed their personal background and prior experiences before they enrolled at WIU Quad Cities. Two categories emerged within this theme: participants' Life Experiences and Community College Experiences. The category of Life Experiences included three sub-categories of experiences that participants shared as part of their journey toward college. Participants referred to High School, Family, and Employment as three components of their life experience prior to college. The category of Community College Experiences included two sub-categories of experiences that participants indicated were part of their journey after they initially enrolled in the community college. Students referred to Attendance and Stopping-out as two components of their community college experience.

### *Student Transition Experiences*

All student participants discussed experiences while transitioning and adjusting to various aspects of the branch campus. Student Transition Experiences included two categories that reflected the types of experiences participants described: Discovering Options and Balancing Multiple Priorities. The category of Discovering Options included four sub-categories of participant experiences as they transitioned to the branch campus. As students described their experiences discovering the options available to them on the branch campus, they discussed Choosing a Major, New Awareness, Decision to Attend Full Time, and Paying for College. All participants discussed their transition experiences within a second category, Balancing Multiple Priorities. I separated content from this category into five sub-categories of Employment, Family Responsibilities, Distraction, Support, and Priorities.

### *Student Engagement Experiences*

Participants described how they engaged with the campus, with others, and in various experiences while they were enrolled in college. Three categories were identified within Student Engagement Experiences: Interaction with Campus Environment, Social Interaction, and Academic Experiences. I identified three sub-categories within Campus Environment and included Nontraditional Campus, Campus Characteristics, and Time Spent on Campus. The category of Social Interaction had three sub-categories of Interaction with Peers, Interactions with Faculty, and Social Activities. I identified five sub-categories under the category of Academic Experiences. Students all described their experiences with Course Assignments, Engaged Learning, Course Format, and Feelings About Classes.

### *Student Motivation Experiences*

I identified three categories related to student descriptions about their motivation while enrolled at a branch campus. The category of Extrinsic Motivation captured the experiences of students with outside influences on their motivation, with three

subcategories of Career, Other People, and Grades. The category of Intrinsic Motivation included student experiences when they were motivated by their own goals and desires, with three sub-categories of Self-Reliance, Personal Enjoyment, and Finishing College. Advice to Others was the third category of student motivation, with two sub-categories of College Advice and Follow Your Dream.

*Theme 1: Student Background and Prior Experiences*

All study participants described life experiences prior to enrolling at WIU Quad Cities. Students shared their personal life experiences and community college experiences and described how these positively or negatively impacted their journey toward college.

*Life Experiences*

Each participant described high school experiences as the beginning of her college-related experiences. While three participants began their story simply by stating that they attended high school, the other three participants described details about their experience with alternative high school pathways. Lori took less than 3 years to receive her high school diploma. She graduated in an accelerated block program that made her eligible to graduate earlier than her high school peers. Serena and Tia also took alternative pathways in high school; however they described their high school experiences as a struggle. According to Serena:

High school was pretty hard for me. I was going to high school but I had to transfer to an alternative high school...I like school but I wasn't maintaining academically because I had a lot of problems at home.

Tia stated that she did not attend high school, and said, "The last grade I completed was eighth grade." Tia said she returned later to complete high school: "I went back when I was 20 and got my GED." Like Serena, Tia attributed problems with home life and family to her struggles to finish high school:

...because it wasn't that I didn't like school, it was more of the family aspect of things of the family I came from...divorce and probably the whole typical story. That was the hardest thing. I was actually transient, so from 14 on, I lived on my

own just wherever I could stay. And so, my focus wasn't like you know learning or getting ahead, it was just surviving.

Tia and Serena both shared that no members of their family had attended college, and some did not finish high school. Tia reflected about her family:

I'm the first in my family to go to school. In fact, out of my brothers and sisters, three of us have GEDs and my youngest brother didn't complete any schooling.

All participants discussed how their families of origin played a significant role in their life decisions after high school, and shared stories about how their parents saw college as a low priority, and valued employment and family because of their own experiences. Pam and Teresa reflected about the role of their family immediately after high school. Pam said she "came into a family that did not have any college graduates before." Teresa's parents also did not attend college, and she explained how she felt this affected her awareness of education options after high school:

I grew up in an era, or maybe it was just my perception of that era, where our parents really didn't communicate to us all the time about everything.

Teresa continued to reflect about her parents' role in her decisions after high school:

We never talked about, you know, are you really serious. I mean let's go look at colleges but they never took that real active approach to it. It was kind of like it's your decision, do what you want to do, kind of the ball's in your court. I didn't feel I guess that they were involved in that by encouraging me to go see other colleges.

Teresa went on to explain that she felt her parents only saw college as a social activity:

I even had friends at college campuses and they didn't really I mean if I wanted to go visit them they said yeah, but it wasn't like oh, yeah, that would be great you know great why don't you see what the campus looks like. Maybe it'd be someplace you want to go. They never said that. It would be just like great, it's a social thing you're doing and it was never like encourage me to further my education or encourage me to that next step which I found which I look back and my dad even was like where'd you get the idea and I'm like oh, I don't know.

Ashley's said her parents did attend college, and she described that her parents expected her to attend college:

As I was growing up, I knew college was something that was just like a given. Like I knew when you graduate from high school, you go to college. That's just what you do. You know there's not an option.

Tia's said that family members were small business owners and expected her to follow the same path. Tia said she knew she wanted something different:

I think I can see a connection now that maybe I couldn't see then between the education and, yeah, you really can get a job with an education. Just coming from I guess a family who, I mean my mom just kind of worked like regular jobs and my dad was always like a more self-employed mechanic that sort of thing so, it was never shown to me that there's that connection between it.

Pam's father did not graduate from college, and Pam explained that after high school her father expected her to explore options he believed were most appropriate for women.

Pam described how her father influenced her path after high school:

My father at the time, I grew up on a family farm, and he was very um old-school and he was like that's not really a very good vocation for women. That's a man's field.

Lori explained that her mother encouraged her to follow the same path she did after high school:

My mom married my dad when she was 17, very young and she's always been a secretary. I mean she's done well for herself, but in the medical field. She never had to go to college. She was trained out of, she went to an all-girls high school and she married my dad so young. And, my dad makes good money.

All six participants shared their experiences with their families of origin and parents' expectations after high school graduation. After high school, participants said they began to form families of their own, including relationships with significant others and experiences with pregnancy and marriage. All participants said they were in relationships with men after high school, including four participants who married shortly after high school graduation. All participants said that they set aside their own goals for their husband's or boyfriend's goals, and to financially support their marriage or relationship. Serena shared:

Actually, before I went to Truman, I had a chance to go to [a University]. But, I turned that down. I turned that down because my boyfriend didn't want me to leave.

Pam shared similar experience and said:

[My husband] wasn't very happy when I said I wanted to go for my Bachelor's degree. In fact, it was a source of tension between us for a while.

Five participants described that starting a family required them to hold a job to share family financial responsibilities. Students described experiences with past jobs and the types of jobs they worked in, and recounted their feelings about the jobs they held earlier in life.

Pam was first employed as a hairdresser and described how she knew early on that this would not be a fulfilling career choice for her:

And, so at that time, some things were put out there for me as far as occupations and it was hairdresser, nurse or teacher. And, none of them really interested me and so I ended up going to school to be a hairdresser initially which was really, I wouldn't say it was disastrous, because it was all right and it paid my bills for a while, but it wasn't something I really enjoyed.

Pam said she continued working off and on with different jobs depending on the needs of her family. She recalled working in retail, as an artist, as a school paraprofessional, and at a therapeutic recreation center. Pam also ran her own business, but still felt professionally unfulfilled: "I had my own business for a while. And, it wasn't what I enjoyed." Pam explained that her career choices were less about personal fulfillment and more about meeting her parent's expectations: "The only thing I knew for sure was that I addressed employment as far as my parents."

All students discussed past employment as one factor that led to their decision to attend community college. Serena, Tia, Teresa, and Ashley all reflected about jobs they described as unenjoyable, unfulfilling, and with no potential for advancement. All participants except Lori previously worked in the retail or service industry and described feelings related to those jobs. Teresa said she did not like her work hours at a retail store: "I couldn't do it anymore. It was just the hours and everything was just kind of daunting and I always wanted a family anyway." Despite the fact that Teresa did not like her job, she stayed employed at the same store for some time because of the promise of advancement:

Well, you know it seems like when I was in retail they kept giving me I think at that time it wasn't really assistant manager, but like a key holder type job. Even

when I was in high school they gave me like the key holder job where I could you know count out the cash register at night.

Teresa continued, “I had a job I did not like for 12 years, and it was the most miserable experience of my life.”

Pam’s said her experience as a school paraprofessional was unfulfilling for a different reason, because she found that she did not agree with the education system’s views on inclusion of students with disabilities. Pam described that inclusion was important to her personally because of her experiences parenting a son with a developmental disability. She explained:

And, discovered that the public school was really not, how should I put it. It was challenging for me as a parent to work in a public school setting, I’ll put it that way because seeing the challenges that the teachers and the professionals are not working with kids who have significant special needs but also knowing a parental side, you know, and the side of the people the individuals with the disabilities they don’t in a public school setting, as passionate as I am about inclusion, they don’t have the resources to do it properly.

#### *Community College Experiences*

Participants described experiences attending the community college, and also their experiences with and reasons for interrupting community college attendance. Having community college experience was typical because WIU Quad Cities is primarily upper-division, serving college juniors and seniors. Ashley, Lori, and Serena said they began community college immediately after high school graduation. Tia, Pam, and Teresa said they enrolled a few years after high school. Although participants described varied entry points into community college, all participants at some point during their college experiences interrupted their enrollment in college. Students conveyed reasons for interrupted enrollment, including the way they scheduled their classes, employment, family, and lack of interaction with peers.

Lori said that she chose to take classes at the community college while she balanced her life priorities: “ I stopped, I started, I maybe only took one class a semester, maybe two.” Ashley said she once examined her transcripts and discovered a similar trend in her college attendance patterns:

The funny thing was since I graduated with my associates degree, I've always gone back to school. And, I've looked at my college transcripts and it's about every two years I took a class.

Tia explained that while attending community college, she simply lost track of how far she had progressed in her coursework: "I was really close to getting my associates, but didn't realize I was so close so I kind of stopped going."

All participants discussed employment and family as primary reasons that they interrupted their community college enrollment. Serena said, "I ended up dropping [classes] too, because I couldn't maintain work and the baby." Pam added:

I stopped doing that to focus more on my family, but because by now I had we had our second child, Corey and he was born with a developmental disability so he had a lot of health issues and stuff when he was born and was very busy with that.

Pam also commented that her professors understood that having children would lead to interrupted enrollment:

And I remember leaving and saying to my instructors at that time, "Well I'll be back in the Fall," and it was kind of funny because they had this all knowing look on their face like, ahh, three little kids.

Ashley cited lack of social connections as the reason she interrupted her enrollment:

I didn't know anybody. So, it was kind of I don't know I just ended up hating it and dropped out. So, I just, I don't know, I just didn't like it there. Just felt really lonely, so I left.

All participants reflected on their community college and academic experiences in comparison to their current experience at the branch campus, including degree of difficulty and their feelings about community college attendance.

Tia recalled the feelings she had about the level of difficulty between the community college and university:

I mean Blackhawk wasn't hard or anything, the community college, but I thought, oh my gosh, a university, you know, I'm never going to make it. I'm going to go in there and I'm not going to pass but I get all As and I don't necessarily try hard.



Serena also related a comparison about academics between the community college and university, and after transferring, she said she felt that university academics were “pretty much the same” as her experience at the community college. However, she proceeded to share that she spent less time on academics at the community college. “Before, at the community college, I could probably wing an hour in, but now I’m studying extra hard.”

Ashley shared that she “hated community college” and added:

I remember back at [a community college] there’d just be some kids there that are just there to be there, and don’t really want to do any school work and here I feel like people are here to get their school work done.

Lori also described what she did not like about attending community college: “It was rare that I had the same people in the classes and I don’t have any friends [from the community college].”

Even though Serena said that community college was easy for her, she felt that community college prepared her for upper-level academics: “What makes it better is because I have the know-how from the city colleges. I know what the professors want.”

### *Theme 2: Student Transition Experiences*

All students said they transferred to WIU Quad Cities after they attended the community college to pursue their bachelor’s degrees. Each participant discussed her experiences with discovering available options as they gained new awareness, chose a major, decided to attend full time, and financed their education. Participants also discussed multiple priorities they balanced while attending college.

#### *Discovering Options*

Participants discussed their initial impressions and experiences gaining new awareness about the branch campus. Lori said that she did not know what to expect when she transferred to WIU Quad Cities, along with four other participants who described uncertainty and unclear expectations. Ashley said she felt “pretty informed before starting” at the branch campus. All participants described their experiences learning more about information and resources available to them to help with their

transition from community college to the branch campus. Academic advisers, friends, and family members were significant sources of new information. But like Teresa, all participants recognized that they were ultimately responsible for learning more about available options. Teresa said, “I had to find my own resources. I mean like I asked coworkers.”

One of the first transitional experiences for students was choosing a major and making decisions about classes. Four students discussed that it was difficult to make informed decisions because they lacked information or awareness about majors and class offerings. Lori said she had little information about what opportunities were offered at WIU Quad Cities and said she would have chosen a different major if she had more information earlier: “I didn’t know anything about and I still don’t know much about it because it’s probably too late” and that she felt like she should have “looked more into it”. She added:

And, I should have taken a little more responsibility for that, you know, I should have got online and looked more into it. I didn’t know exactly. Like I believe, I mean my cousins that went through here. One for accounting and one for teaching so I knew the school, where it was and things like that.

Tia and Teresa both said they wished they had talked more about their options. Teresa said she initially felt insecure about initiating conversations with people on campus. Tia referred to talking with someone about class offerings saying, “I guess I wish that somebody would have been able to tell me now you have to take these classes and these classes.”

Choosing a major was also a transitional experience for students. Lori explained that she sought direction from a WIU Quad Cities academic adviser:

I had met with the counselors and stuff and I’m like how can I, what do I do, and then that’s when he told me I didn’t know anything about the General Studies program and he’s like I think you’d be a good fit and then I decided to.

Pam chose a major on her own and indicated that information about her chosen major was hard to find:

I researched oh for at least a week or two trying to find a good fit for a Horticulture major and stumbled on RPTA [Recreation Park and Tourism Administration]. And it's the best kept secret in the world because it's like people say what is that?

Three students discussed their transition to college and reflected on their decision to attend full time. Teresa commented that she received a degree guide who helped her make informed choices about whether to attend full time. She said, "Well, I worked with [my advisor], and I realized, gosh, if I went full time, I could get done in a year." Having a plan in place helped her to feel like she could accomplish her goals by attending college full time:

He literally kind of had a plan out for me to do that and told me right away if you want to do this, you're going to have to take summer classes. I'm like okay, that's fine. And, I mean, I ended up taking 8 hours last summer which I didn't want to do but it was like I told you to keep me on track, you're telling me what to do and now I have to do it. Like if he would have told me that's going to be 18 hours a semester, I would said I can't do that, so let's push it back.

Teresa said she previously made decisions about whether to attend full time or part time based on what other students did:

I guess I figured that oh, it would be like a four-year process going part time because you hear other people I've been doing it four and five years but they might only be taking one class versus two and three.

Teresa added, "I mean it was a realistic goal and I kind of didn't think it was."

### *Balancing Multiple Priorities*

All participants discussed their efforts to balance multiple priorities including family, employment, children, and academics as they transitioned to the branch campus. Children and parenting responsibilities intersected with college, employment, and social life. Teresa described her feelings about interacting with her children after a full day of classes when she still needed to study:

It's like when I said I have to study he'd [husband] be like mom's down the basement, you're not going down there. I mean it was like I'd come home and I'm like I don't want to come home at 9:00 at night and have the kids up. I just can't deal with that.

Serena also discussed challenges with interacting with her children when she needed to work on class assignments:

If I have to write a paper, my baby is crying, the other child is screaming my name, my husband is trying to calm them both down. I'm hungry. I'm typing on the computer. They yell at me and I'm yelling back "Leave me alone." My husband has to go upstairs, go to the washroom, run back out because he has to do flag detail. I'm holding the baby, trying to type my paper. He's smacking me in the face and pulling on me to pay him some attention and he doesn't want his bottle or to be changed.

Pam discussed how she adapted to balancing school with her children over time:

I went from the mom who by her sophomore year in college was very crabby and because it was very overwhelming. And, to the mom now a senior in college my kids see studying and you know I've learned to just sometimes I just need to stop and take a break and spend time with my family versus trying to beat my way through it, so to speak.

Participants said they were employed while enrolled in college because they were partly responsible for financially supporting their children and families. Lori explained her reason for working while enrolled in college: "I need money, I need to work." In addition to financial reasons for working, Pam shared that she sought additional experiences through employment:

I started working my sophomore year in college. I worked through [community college]. And, I worked ever since then. And, my sole reason for that was because each experience brought with it something that would enhance my degree.

Participants said that maintaining employment while enrolled in college was a challenge. Serena said, "I was doing two classes...with trying to work, too, so it got kind of difficult." Pam summed up her feelings about working and attending college: "That's a lot to work at least 20 hours a week and go to school more than full time."

Participants described that they had very little free time outside of employment, family responsibilities, and college. Teresa and Tia both stated that if they were not on campus, "then I'm at work." Tia added, "I have absolutely no social life." While five participants indicated no involvement in social activities, Ashley was able to be involved in a local water ski team. She shared that water skiing during the summer was her one

outlet for social activity, and explained that she includes her daughter with her skiing activities:

And, then I'm usually done with work and done with school and everything by 5:00 just so I can go pick up my daughter and from there now that it's summer, we do water skiing so we go there every night. And, otherwise besides that, we just hang out.

Students described two emotions they felt as a result of balancing multiple identities. Two students described that they felt distracted by all of their responsibilities and found it difficult to focus. All students described how they prioritized their time, and expressed feelings of struggle, stress, and frustration, and a feeling of encouragement from others. Serena shared:

It is very frustrating, like the only difference now is because I have a husband, but it was very, very, very frustrating because sometimes I wanted to stay after school and do like the little student activities.

Serena also shared how her multiple demands impacted her time:

I knew that I would have to motivate myself extra hard because the hours I'm at work, I'm losing time out of studying.

Teresa talked about how she found time to both spend time with her family and focus on studies:

I mean I would spend my core time with the kids, but after dinner, would be like I'm off duty, I'm down here, I truly close myself off from my family from that point on to focus on my studies and stuff. And, my children would...they're so sweet because they would come down at night and I always tell them to give me a hug and kiss and they really would. And, I just love that.

Teresa said she made a conscious decision to accept lower grades to spend more time with her family:

But, after I don't know I would have to say maybe after the first semester or something, I felt like you know what those days are going to be gone one day and I need to spend that quality time with them and if it means being up till midnight, well, guess what? It means getting a B.

Pam also shared how her grades suffered because of her multiple priorities:

It's true and my grades haven't always, although I get descent grades. My GPA's not a problem, but, I would've been probably a straight A student if I had not done it this way.

All participants discussed how they received support from significant others and other family members as they balanced multiple life priorities. Serena noted that she received support from her boyfriend after she had her first child:

Yes, he's a good supporter because it's like I get worn down like before I had the second child when I had the first one, school and work I was just sitting there like if I get so frustrated, I would stop moving and stare. I would do that a lot with the first child.

Serena said that she received financial support from her husband and laughed when she said he also supports her by cooking meals:

He supplies more than half the support for me right now this semester because I'm not supporting myself. He's providing the income. He's cooking because I don't cook. Shh, don't tell anyone.

Pam also laughed when she described that her husband learned to cook to support her while in college:

Well, he's not a cook. He never has been. [Laughs] But, he's learned to cook a little bit and even if it's simple things, I mean I get a kick out of him when we go get groceries whether I'm with him or not because he even gets groceries sometimes if I'm not able to. And, he may buy more fast foods which I really not as healthy for our family which is one of my goals when I am done with everything we will start eating healthy again.

Lori said she found childcare support from her parents and emotional support from a cousin. Although she said her parents did not always understand her decision to attend college, as discussed later in more detail in this chapter, she said her parents helped her with childcare while she attended college:

For me, if I look back, it's more physical support as far as, you know, helping me with my children or, you know, watching them. I hate to say it like that because I know my mom and dad really support me.

Lori described how she looked to her cousin as a model for how to balance multiple life priorities:

I have a really close cousin that kind of did the same thing. She had kids young. She is very successful. She came here. She got an accounting degree and she works on the arsenal now, so she knows. Actually, she stopped working. She didn't work at all for a year. And, she married the husband and they were doing okay, but they struggled. She had two kids and she's the one that I would say that I would relate to the most and she's the one that's helped me emotionally.

### *Theme 3: Student Engagement Experiences*

All participants shared stories about how they participated in various aspects of college life. They discussed challenges, barriers, opportunities, and resources that contributed to or hindered their success. Students described how they engaged in college experiences by interacting with the campus environment, their social interactions, and their academic experiences.

#### *Campus Environment*

All participants described experiences with the campus environment. They characterized the campus as nontraditional, described the amount of time they spent on campus, and described campus characteristics.

Serena specifically defined WIU Quad Cities as a “nontraditional school” and said, “Having a nontraditional school such as Western, it does help you have a life outside of school and to complete your degree.” She provided more detail about what she believed characterizes a nontraditional institution:

I don't know how the traditionals are run, but I know that here you make your own schedule, you fit what works for you and if you feel you can make it, then you put that schedule into play for your academics. It's not like you have to do this, you have to do this, you have to do this. Even in the nontraditional, I think you can even take a semester off and not be penalized for it.

Tia also perceived WIU Quad Cities as a “nontraditional school” and explained that she did not feel she could have been successful anywhere else:

I guess here there are more nontraditional students and so I don't think if I was on a campus that had mostly traditional, I wouldn't feel as comfortable because those people wouldn't be able to relate to me, I wouldn't be able to relate to them but, even though in my class I am probably one of the oldest.

Tia defined further how she viewed a nontraditional campus:

So, a lot of the people are still living nontraditional experiences as far as living on their own, taking care of themselves that sort of thing. So, I think this campus fits well with me. And, like I was saying before I think that at this particular time I think there are so many people going back to school that probably maybe hadn't been five or ten years ago. Maybe even this campus wouldn't have been quite as traditional as it is now.

Ashley said she did not perceive that the campus was a fit for her as a nontraditional student with a child. Ashley shared that she was going to change her enrollment to the Macomb campus the following semester because she anticipated she would receive more support by living on campus and would have the opportunity to participate in more traditional experiences:

And, I've also decided to go the Macomb campus. I figured I could have daycare provided for me while I take my classes during the morning. Have the whole afternoon to study and then I'd be able to spend my time with my daughter at night...and they have family housing there. We have a two bedroom apartment ready for us on campus which is going to be very convenient."

Five participants said they perceived themselves and other students on campus as nontraditional. They described age, work experience, and having family responsibility as the definition of being nontraditional. Pam said:

And, we ranged in age from the traditional student that was fresh out of high school. And then we had several that were in the early 20's and I guess we had another young lady that was a very traditional student also. But the other three young men were nontraditional young people. One had been in the military. One had worked at a packing plant where his dad had worked all of his life and he said this is not for me.

Tia described a classmate as traditional age, but as someone who had nontraditional experiences and family life:

Even the girl that's usually my partner, she's 19, getting her bachelor's which is amazing. I always tell my daughter about her. She's 19. She's getting her bachelor's. I think she turned 20, actually. And, you know, she has had some similar things as far as she does have a job. She lives with her parents, but she completely supports herself.

Teresa described her view about the characteristics that make a student nontraditional:

At first, I was judging them by their age. And, then as I started communicating with them that was not necessarily it. I mean I really was judging them by their age. You're nontraditional because you're older. You're traditional because you're younger. Some of these students are right in between. And, they're more nontraditional. That they were going to school later on in life.

Teresa referred to a classmate when she described what it means to be a nontraditional student:

I mean there were some students, there was a gentleman I had in my class who I thought was younger but he was older than what he looked like. And, he was



kind of like me. He quit his job and decided I'm going to go school full-time and getting this done getting it behind me. And, I think it is very hard to do later on in life because you're used to that income and you're used to that way of life and then to stop doing that and be committed. It's not an easy step. So, I guess I saw nontraditional students as being the more the older student who was willing to drop everything in life to go back to school.

Pam said she perceived what four other participants also recognized, that nontraditional students were both younger and older, and what they had in common was balancing multiple priorities while attending college. She said:

What I was seeing with my classmates that were a different nontraditional than myself, these were young people who were working one if not two jobs plus going to school full-time trying to support themselves.

Five participants said they felt comfortable at WIU Quad Cities because they were attending college with other students of varied ages. Lori shared:

It's such a good community here where you feel like that I think no matter how old you are, I don't know anybody that would be uncomfortable coming here, I guess. You don't feel too old, too young.

Ashley had a different experience, and said she felt she was different from the older nontraditional students:

I feel like everybody is just all different ages just and I kind of feel like a lot of people keep to themselves and so I don't know too much and like we're there for school so we just mainly talk about school. I mean there are a lot of women that are you know 40s, 50s...old enough to be my mom.

Pam also said she observed two groups of nontraditional students, including a younger group and an older group. While Ashley said that students were old enough to be her mom, Pam said, "I'm nontraditional, but not your undergrad nontraditional, and a lot of my classroom associates are much younger than me, my children's age." Pam said the age difference allowed her to be a mentor to other students:

I've even enjoyed those experiences with them because many of them look at me not only as an equal, but a parental figure, a mentor. And, I don't mind that because I have four children of my own.

Four other participants described that they felt the nontraditional campus and nontraditional students were a good match for them as nontraditional students. Tia said:

And, I think sometimes my age of students is actually better because I think we have more to focus, I guess. We know we've got to get it done. We need to get out and get that job or continue our education.

Teresa said:

I remember when I was in college as a younger student I would've been more hesitant to go to the professor and say I don't get this or this isn't fair or can you explain this in a way that I understand...I think you appreciate the teachers more... I think it's greater as an older than a younger student.

Tia said:

I guess here there are more nontraditional students and so I don't think if I was on a campus that had mostly traditional, I wouldn't feel as comfortable because those people wouldn't be able to relate to me, I wouldn't be able to relate to them.

Two students discussed their challenges dealing with being nontraditional students at WIU Quad Cities. They both conveyed that the internship required by their major presented a challenge for them as students with jobs and families. Pam said she was already employed and had hoped that she could integrate her current employment into her internship. She explained:

I was quite disappointed when I was told by my intern coordinator that I could not do my internship at the extension office which were what my intentions have been. I really enjoy it there. We do a lot of programming that mirrors parks and rec departments as far as youth programming and things of that nature in the summer months.

Pam then described how she adapted her expectations to meet the internship requirement for her major:

And, so I'll be honest with you, so what I did at that point when I was so frustrated because I was out finding an internship that I thought would be meaningful to me and fit the university's criteria.

Tia shared that she could not give up her job for an internship because she needed to have an income, and said, "I did a year at [the community college] in the medical assistance program, and I finished that with the exception of the internship because I realized how low they pay."

Tia said she changed her major to general studies because it offered her a flexible curriculum and because it did not require an internship. Tia said she could continue to

take courses in law enforcement toward her career goal, but would not have to quit her job. She shared what she was told by her internship adviser:

They pretty much tell you, you have to quit your job and often times it is unusual hours and that sort of thing. So, that kind of swayed me toward the general studies with a minor in law enforcement.

Tia also shared her perspective about the internship adviser and her opinion about how he perceives nontraditional students:

There is somebody that kind of oversees some of the internships from [Macomb]. He's basically has said he doesn't like nontraditional students and that he doesn't think that they're focused and you have to basically give up everything to be able to go to college and I don't think that's true for most people.

Tia and five other participants described what they liked about a variety of other campus attributes. Lori shared:

It's such a good community here where you feel like that I think no matter how old you are, I don't know anybody that would be uncomfortable coming here, I guess. You don't feel too old, too young.

All participants described the campus environment as friendly. Teresa said:

The lady that watches the parking lot, I'm not sure what her role is, but she waved at me because she knew me. You know, she's seen me for two years as I forget to put my parking tag in I don't feel any qualms about walking up to her and saying I switched vehicles today and I didn't change my parking tag. [She would say] 'Oh no problem. We know you're here'.

Tia described personal attention she received from financial aid and advising staff:

[Stuart] in financial aid has been really helpful and all the advisors. Any time I have a question they definitely answer, answer e-mails quickly and everything like that.

Serena shared that she felt a close sense of community with her peers because of smaller class sizes. She said, "It's a small community so everyone pretty much knows one another and can ask each other questions about the assignments we need to do."

Although all participants described that the campus community was small and friendly, Ashley said that she did not feel a sense of community at WIU Quad Cities:

I don't feel like I'm at a campus as much here as when you know I was away. I kind of feel like it's more like a business here. Just because you don't have that campus life feeling like you know some people walking all over and you kind of

walk in and it's real quiet like you're in a business. You know people at a normal campus people are loud and, you know....

Even though five participants described feeling welcome on a smaller campus, all six participants indicated that they spend very little time on campus except for taking classes. Pam summed up the sentiment of all participants whose words only slightly varied from one another: "If I'm not in class, I'm not here." When students are on campus when they are not in class, this is typically immediately before, between, or immediately following a class. Students use this time to interact with peers, use campus resources such as the library or computer lab, or take advantage of quiet study time. Students shared why quiet study time is important to them to be able to focus while they are away from family and parenting responsibilities. Pam said, "It's a nice opportunity to have quiet time where I don't have family around me."

### *Social Interaction*

All participants discussed their social interactions with other people while enrolled at the branch campus. They described their interactions with peers and faculty, and their on-campus and off-campus social activities.

All students said they met other students in classes they had in common. Pam described that she met students that she may not have otherwise interacted with because of their age difference:

Actually, it was several young ladies that started about the same time I did. They're closer to my daughter's age than they are to mine. How the group formed was I think just by virtually having so many classes together. And, so often times you get to know people and you find your personalities click and you and you enjoy each other's company.

Lori said she met friends in her communication and marketing classes:

It's kind of nice to see the same group of people. There's a big group of us. I have my committed marketing kind of fun and my communication kind of friends. So, it's kind of nice. I mean I don't think I don't know how much we'll talk after school just because outside of class or outside of our school day we didn't really get together. But, I would call them my friends.

Yet even when students interact with peers, participants said that these relationships remain primarily on campus and do not typically overflow into other aspects of their

lives. Lori said, “We never really met outside of class...we all had jobs, we had kids.”

Lori added:

So, primarily, I would say 89% of the time [our discussions are] about the class talk. But...I would know about her boyfriend or if she’s moving or going on vacation. Things like that, I guess. You know, she’ll ask for pictures of my kids.”

Participants referred to electronic communication via e-mail or social networking as one avenue to connect to their peers while they were not on campus. Lori said she used e-mail to connect with her classmate; however, their communication was primarily related to class work:

...for instance, the marketing class we just did the big event and we went into committees. We e-mailed. We had it scheduled. We e-mailed every Monday and every Thursday of our progress or questions. We would communicate on the phone.

Serena felt that she and her classmates did not interact much during class because they knew they would connect electronically. She said, “We all just took each other’s e-mail address and worked on the assignment from there.”

Pam and Lori said they both interacted with other students during breaks between classes, and went off campus with other students to eat lunch. Pam said:

And, I also spend time with one of my classmates or several young ladies that we meet for lunch. We might stop down to the mall for a little bit and walk around just to shop. I know in the past semesters, we’ve actually gone to class and one of our professors at that time...would smile when we walked in the door and he said so what was your elected leisure experience today before you came to class? Because we would try out different restaurants and things and we’d go to class and we’d tell him what we’d been up to.

Teresa said she found it easy to meet people when she spent time on campus in the computer lab: I would meet other [people]...sitting at the computer and all of a sudden you’re talking to someone... I have just started meeting people and you’re not really doing homework because you’re conversing. I don’t know why I’m at the computer, I’m not doing anything. But, I really enjoyed that socialization. It’s like getting to know other students...”

Tami explained further that she is comfortable socializing:

I just found that to be really but I'm a very talkative, easy going person so it was really easy for me to try and spark a conversation with someone maybe because I didn't really want to be at the computer. So, that would be typical and it was like even when I'm in the cafeteria I sit at a table with somebody and I kind of knew or I would strike up a conversation with them.

Ashley said that she is less comfortable socializing and explained that she is shy. In high school and at other colleges she attended, Ashley said she was able to get past her shyness by participating in college sponsored activities like cheerleading and cross country. She said:

If they had cheerleaders here, I would totally do it because I'd know that I had my family to help out with [my daughter] if I had practices at night. You know, I'd probably meet more people and be a lot more social here on campus, too, just from meeting people through sports. So, that would be cool if we could. When I first went to Lincoln and I was doing cross-country and cheerleading and so I met people you know the first day I was there because we had you know team meetings and everything. So, I think socially being like a part of a group or being on a sports team can definitely help you know feel more comfortable and more social life going on. So, I think that helped me.

Tia and Serena said they also found it challenging to meet people and socialize on campus. Serena said she did not have the opportunity to meet people, because she does not spend time on campus:

I go straight to the washroom and straight to class. Well, I'll probably go straight to class. I may head in from the car right there. I don't really stop to do anything.

Tia said she did not socialize because she felt that people in her major did not spend time on campus compared to other majors that she believed did more group work:

I don't really interact a lot with outside of people that I necessarily know and I think probably definitely maybe the area I'm in law enforcement I don't notice the groups of people in there necessarily hang out socially as much as I see like a lot of I think they must be teaching majors because that's what I hear them talking about. They seem to socialize more but I think they probably have more group work being in that field than what we have.

Tia also described that she thought the focus on academics led to fewer social interactions:

As most of the students here they're here because I mean there's not a lot of social time here, you know, I mean there's a few clubs and that but most of it is academics. So, I think that makes it easier.

Ashley said she felt like she had little in common with her classmates:

I guess maybe you just [classes] are what you're here for so that's what your mindsets on. You don't really think too much about what [other students] are doing in their life or what I'm doing in my life. Sometimes it gets brought up and you can talk about it but it doesn't seem like you ever like I've never like became friends with being in a class with them, I feel like. We may have like having kids in common and stuff like that but I don't know I feel like we don't really hang out outside of school or I don't. Some people might.

Ashley said she felt most connected to other people when she had an on-campus job and had the opportunity to interact with campus staff and other student employees:

I think it also helped me because I worked the first semester I came here. I worked at the front desk here. And, so, it kind of helped me get to know you know what resources are around for help and just to get to know the staff a little bit better.

Ashley said that once she stopped working on campus, she had less social interaction with other people:

It's I mean it's changed since I don't work here anymore second semester. But, like as far as coming here for classes, it's pretty much stayed the same. I was obviously here a lot more when I worked. I think just from working here before I actually started classes. So, it definitely helped to get to know people ahead of classes and by meeting some of the professors here just from working.

All six participants described how they interacted with faculty, and what they liked and did not like about their professors. Ashley shared a reason she did not previously interact with faculty prior to attending WIU Quad Cities. She said, "I've been in some classrooms where I've just felt like the teacher would just make me feel dumb, you know. It's just like you'd rather not ask." She went on to share how she is more likely to interact with WIU Quad Cities faculty because she feels they are approachable:

I feel like the teachers here you can approach them easily. They can help you. They're easy to talk to if you have any questions. And, if you need help with anything, you're not going to feel nervous to ask for it...I think sometimes you have just go and talk to him one on one and he really he sets it out for you. That was the main thing that I've had since I've been here...

Serena also shared that she feels comfortable interacting with faculty, and because of that, also initiated contact by asking questions and e-mailing if she needed clarification:

You can ask questions, you can engage with not only the teacher, and the students. I really just engage in the faculty e-mail if I need to know something. Just keep open communications so I won't get lost or misunderstand something.

Lori described faculty approachability, and said she feels a connection through many faculty who know her by name:

There's not many instructors that still don't know my name. Maybe the first semester, like I said. Like when you get on track, so I have really enjoyed my instructors. When I can, I have taken them again for another class that they have offered.

Tia talked about the availability of faculty:

Professor Donaldson. She's just amazing I mean she's always available. It doesn't matter, she will I mean just even in her personal time, she will make herself available.

Teresa, Tia, and Ashley interacted with professors who motivated them because of their enthusiasm. Teresa said she likes professors who seem to love their jobs:

I like it when professors love their jobs, and I've had some really good professors. So, I've been very blessed because it motivates me to do better. And, it's like it makes me want to strive for that maximum level.

Teresa added that she enjoyed interacting with a professor who loved his job:

And I just love it when a professor loves his job because it's like he just kind of can't get enough of the classes that he teaches because it's like it's just invigorating.

Teresa also shared that she interacted less with a professor whom she felt did not provide good explanations about class expectations:

I wish they would have said something like you know I can't explain that like, obviously, Teresa, like you want but maybe there's someone else that can. Or guide me where I wanted more information. They never did that. It was just like it stopped there. And, it was like so that way it was like okay well then this is all I need to do to pass the class type of mentality is what I got. And, I know everybody's different, but that's just how it was for me.

Pam, Tia, Teresa, and Lori said that their helpful professors helped them feel more engaged. Pam said:

I feel very engaged by my instructors because they know us all very well. They know our background and our family situations, the dynamics of our worlds and I think that affects success.

Lori added, "I feel like they go over and above sometimes. They genuinely care."

Pam related a story about how she connected with a professor because he exposed a group to travel opportunities:



So, we traveled to competitions around the United States. I found this gentleman very interesting because he wanted our experience to be as rich as possible. I don't know if it was from his life experiences as he progressed through life or if that was just his nature but we did competition in Texas and when we went there I think as much for the young people as I for myself as I've never been to Texas before in my life.

Pam added that she felt that the professor engaged with the group of students because he related to them because of similar background:

He grew up on a farm himself. None of his siblings had an education and he now has a Ph.D. and I think the hardship that he'd experienced... made him very passionate about passing it on to all his students. And, I think he saw a lot of him in us because all of us came from family farms.

Tia agreed that life experiences made for engaging experiences with faculty:

[Dr. Donaldson] encourages you while she will find you the internships, you know, give you connections to people. If you have a question, she really completely answers it and she teaches her class so well that you, it's not just reading out of a book and learning, it's actually I guess her real life experience and the field that she teaches. And, [Dr. Bea] as well, the same thing.

### *Social Activities*

Students provided limited examples of social activities on-campus and off-campus. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Ashley participated in summer water ski activities as a social outlet. Two participants indicated they participate in volunteerism, and Pam explained that volunteering is something she has done throughout life:

I've done a lot of volunteer work from day one. I was a room mother, Sunday school teacher, Bible school teacher, most anything the kids were involved in. I was little league coach. I was involved in that. I was invited to be a member of the steering committee for the Quad City food club initiated in Davenport, Iowa and so a lot of wonderful experiences with building a foundation for a nonprofit and all those things."

Pam said that volunteerism was also a requirement in one of her classes:

When I was first year with WIU, I was required to do a hundred hours in volunteer service and they offered me a job. And, I've worked there now for a year. Very much enjoyed it. It has been a very rich experience.

Lori said her volunteer activities are what initiated her interest in attending college:

And then I started volunteering at the Make-A-Wish Foundation and I decided that's when I decided to go more into like I love business. I love promotions. Event planning, so that's when I kind of decided to come here when I finished Scott.

Teresa shared that she attended some activities on campus. However, even when asked, other participants did not share any experiences with social activities on campus. Lori described some of the on-campus activities in which she had an interest, but she did not participate in them:

The only thing I wished I would've gotten more, had more time to do is the different activities they have or the different, I don't know, clubs or, you know, like toastmasters would have been excellent for me because I need to work on public speaking or being part of student government.

Lori explained why she was not involved in on-campus activities:

I just didn't have the time because...I have just been on a one-way track. I have been here for classes and then, you know, I had to get home to my kids. Or, like I said, I do so much with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, I feel I would've had to give up that to mean do one or the other.

### *Academic Experiences*

All student participants said they were enrolled in classes at WIU Quad Cities. All participants described their experiences with class assignments, including preparing papers, fact scenarios, work sheets, class presentations, projects, homework, reading, and group work. Four students described their experiences with group assignments and presentations they worked on with classmates. Tia explained how she formed a group and maintained the same group in other classes:

We always pick our own groups and our group actually started it was just who we sat by. So, like the first day of class the beginning of the semester, there was a lot of first time students, so it was like our first semester. And, there were some students, it was their second semester. And, so, we just happened to break up into groups as to who we sat by, but now we continue to break up into groups because we always have and even in our other classes.

Ashley stated, "Sometimes I'm kind of shy," and said group work was how she got to know other students: "I mean that we'll do class presentations which I think they're always fun to do or like speeches because you can kind of get to know other people kind of and their personality." Pam said group assignments taught her how to work with other people:

It's taught me a lot about group work and which was something that I also lacked. I'm the type of person who would rather to do it myself than delegate and we all

know we can get more done if we delegate. And, so, those experiences with that but not just the positive side of learning how to delegate and share the responsibilities but also how to deal with people who don't uphold their own responsibilities without having some emotions brought into it, anger.

Participants said they liked group work as long as they felt like other students contributed equally. Ashley said:

It's been good. I've liked everybody that I've worked with. Everybody seems to do their part, too. I haven't really found any like lazy people or people who aren't willing to contribute.

Participants also said they enjoyed assignments that allowed them to apply new knowledge to some aspect of their lives. Serena had previous experience conducting a survey in her job, and enjoyed an assignment that helped her to know more about them from "the other side":

Well, okay, like my Research and Evaluation class, before that class, I didn't know about research skills and surveys. I mean I knew what surveys were, but I didn't know like the general meaning of them, and how they're conducted, stuff like that. I just know I was the person giving surveys a lot, to take a survey. So, actually applying it and finding out why do people do research and what are the methods that kind of thing taught me, like well, I'm on the other side. I get to see what the person is looking for.

Lori also enjoyed assignments that let her apply new knowledge to past experience and knowledge:

So, I think the instructors do a really good job when, you know, they have their curriculum but yet they try to let you bring your own life experiences or things. Even in my marketing class there were times we got to pick businesses that interested us and then do this project that they would want.

She added:

Even in my first semester here, I believe it was a CS class and we had to do a, it was really hard for me, because it was a lot of mathematical and (word) equations but yet we got to pick a project like a business or and then I got to bring in my health care in it, so I did a study on synergism...I got stats and documents on that. So, I got to bring my own expertise into it, but yet I had to learn how to formula the stuff, like the thesis was really new for me. I've never wrote anything like that.

Participants shared that they were active in the classroom by asking questions, discussing class topics, and listening to others. Serena said:

I ask questions. If it's something that I don't understand, I don't have a problem with that. I ask questions because I want to get the best that I can out of the class.

Ashley shared her experience with class discussions:

“We just kind of like I said, class discussions kind of makes the classes go by a little bit faster. Sometimes I’m kind of shy. I keep my opinions to myself but, if they call on me, I will. But, I always like to listen to all the other people bicker. I guess it depends on the topic. If it’s something I’m totally into, I’ll put my word in but otherwise, I just kind of observe. I kind of just lay back.”

Tia said she enjoyed class discussion: “I like hearing the stories of the other people in classes and particularly some of the professors.”

Some participants talked about their experiences with various class formats. They discussed their experience with various class schedules, online classes, and videoconference classes. All participants talked about their perception that class schedules were flexible for their busy schedules. Tia said:

The classes are pretty flexible as far as they offer quite a few between the evening and the day a lot more than the community college did. That was a big problem there because they would only offer some things in the day, which makes it impossible, you know, to take. But, here there’s it’s a little more flexible.

While night classes fit well with Tia’s schedule, Lori offered a different perspective: “There were days especially when I would have to take night classes, you know, finding sitters, you know, missing my kids’ activities and just the homework.”

Serena added that she feels classes are too long in length: “Sometimes I feel like some classes can be like kind of too long and it’s like you could explain that in 20 minutes.”

However, Serena said a mix of schedule options created flexibility for her schedule, “Because you have online, you have night classes, you have morning classes. Everything is not really set like you have to do this.”

Two students talked about taking videoconference classes that connect between WIU-Macomb and WIU Quad Cities, where the professor teaches from the remote location. Videoconference classes are referred to by students as “CODEC,” and students shared that this learning environment created challenges for how they engaged in class.

Pam said:

A lot of my classes are CODEC [video conference] classes out of Macomb and the quality of that experience is not as rich as it would be in the classroom. In fact, I sometimes wonder if those classes wouldn't be better suited to be offered online, although I enjoy the classroom discussion. I think it's just human nature the way you run a microphone, you don't talk as much. And then when you do, speaking in a classroom setting like that there's another class, however minimal, there may be some jumbling sometimes what you're listening to or what they're hearing so then it makes you less prone to participate.

Although Pam said she had been successful in videoconference classes, she thought other learning modalities were more effective:

I've been very successful in those [videoconference] classes. I'm not saying that that's held me back from that, but I had an online class...and I think you can get just as full of an experience through the postings online as you can sitting for two days a week for an hour and a half watching someone on a T.V. camera.

Lori said, "I had CODEC [videoconference] classes, not many, I don't care for those as much as the in-class experience; I really liked the in-class experience."

Math requirements presented a specific challenge for participants. Lori pointed to a math requirement as one reason that students avoided certain majors and selected the general studies degree that has less emphasis on math:

I had a hard time when I was going for a straight marketing, the calculus thing, I hadn't taken Math in years so I was really nervous about that so that was the deciding factor. You either take calculus or go to [General Studies].

Tia shared that she felt weak in math:

Math is not my strongest suit so I haven't had any math here. I had to take the statistics class over the summer as my last class for my associates and that I worked really hard at to get a B. It's just not my strong area.

Teresa said she experienced difficulty with math. She described her experience with math requirements, and how she felt uninformed about math requirements prior to enrolling in a math class:

The math was over my head. And, to me when you're doing problems that have math like that, why isn't there other prerequisites to get me there? And, if the prerequisites are Math 200 level courses that I had at [the community college] then somebody just needs to say to me you know it's been a while since you've had math this is really calculus driven math you might have some challenges. And, I wish that information or that gap would be gone....And I wish that information was more so I better prepare myself for the class because I there was a class I took this semester, it was over my head.

Tia said that the level of difficulty of her other classes was reasonable. She explained, “But, as far as the classes here, it’s just really easy and I haven’t had a problem.” All participants shared their feelings about taking classes, including “no complaints,” enjoyment, stress, anxiety, fear, and not liking the time commitment.

#### *Theme 4: Student Motivation and Attitude*

All participants discussed their motivation and attitude about college. They shared examples of extrinsic motivation, such as career, graduate school, other people, and grades. They also discussed the ways they were intrinsically motivated, such as self-reliance, personal enjoyment, desire to finish college, and experiences with success. Finally, participants reflected about their college experience and offered advice to other students based on their own experiences.

##### *Extrinsic Motivation*

Students described that they felt motivated to succeed because of employment possibilities, including higher income, gaining qualifications, the prospect of career advancement, and working in a personally fulfilling career. Pam said a higher income was important to support her family:

The opportunities you will be able to provide for your children as well as your experiences will be far more richer and will make you a better parent long term. The \$28,000 a year that you’re making now as a second year teacher is far less than you’ll be making 20 years from now or close to retirement.

In addition to a job with higher salary, one participant said that health benefits were also something students hoped to gain access to by graduating from college. Ashley said:

I can get a higher paying job, one that has benefits for her and for me. A lot of jobs you don’t really get good benefits or the best hour shifts and pay you know if you don’t have an education.

Although Pam previously enjoyed some of her past jobs and had experience, she said that without a college degree she lacked certain qualifications to advance in her career. She said, “I didn’t have any of those skill sets. I can’t say not any, because I had those life experiences...but no education revolving around it.”

All students said they were motivated to attend college because they felt it would lead to career advancement. Serena said she “wanted a better job.” Serena said she felt that the college experience and a degree would get her a better job. Lori agreed, and described her feelings that her current job had no opportunity to advance:

I respect my job and I love it but it’s like there was nothing to move to. I was topped out...I need more, I don’t know what the word is, just more opportunities and I mean I just felt like...once you’re done with CNA, there’s really nothing there once you get so many years in and you learn all your skills there’s nothing.

Students also expressed that they felt that advancing in their careers and receiving more income would lead to a feeling of personal fulfillment. Tia reflected about her current job, “I’m not changing anything in the world and that’s really important to me...I wanted to do more.” Pam added, “Things needed to be meaningful to me.” She explained what it means to have a meaningful career:

It’s meaningful to me and that goes back to my professor at [the community college] [who was] saying to me...if you don’t finish, you’re going to be that individual that folks like me like to hire because you are passionate at what you do and you’re very skilled. And he said if you continue [with college] on you’ll be the person in charge and it will be your program. And, you won’t be just one of those worker bees that we benefit from.

Teresa said that she feels a fulfilling career leads to more happiness and said, “I want to love what I do because then your family is happier, you’re happier, your friends are happier.”

All students discussed how other people affected their motivation to succeed. Even though they are older students with children of their own, Pam, Lori, and Teresa discussed their parents’ negative influence on their motivation throughout college. As mentioned earlier, participants said that their families did not attend college and lacked understanding about how to support their college decisions and experiences. Lori said her mother did not support her emotionally throughout college:

So, it was hard for her, I mean. She never said you need to quit, but she wasn’t as emotionally supportive as I guess what I am saying the whole time. It has been a long time, though. So, I just explained it to her and I explained, you know, what I want to do. It’s hard to do because here I have this degree and I don’t know what job I’m going to get with it. And, I just don’t think she understood maybe how it

is out there until recently. [She said] do you really need to do this? Do you really need to finish? I don't think they understood until these last few weeks that it was worth it, kinda. And, I always knew it was. I kinda had to fight or for instance, when I got my associates through [community college], my mom was kinda "Why can't you go get a job without [a college degree]?"

Teresa shared that her husband tried to support her through a difficult class, but she said he did not always know how to help:

Because I kept telling my husband it would be like he would help me as much as he could, but he didn't get it.

Teresa said she looked for other sources of motivation:

I used former students who I found out after I was taking the class oh, you took the class two semesters ago, oh, well, can you help me understand this? And, there were days when I called my friend, [Jill], and I'd be like oh my god, I'm so tired of this I can't do it and why would I wait so long to go to school. And, she's like [Teresa], I'm so proud of you. It's just like they say that one word and you're like okay, I can do this.

Teresa shared that she felt motivated to succeed by talking to co-workers who wished they had gone to college:

And, I mean it's like you start talking to people at work and they're like I never got my degree and I'm like oh, you never did. I just assumed you had your degree. No, and I'm so proud of you for doing it because I don't have any desire now to do it and it's something I've always wanted to do. It's like you hear that well, I'm kind of doing this for you now, too, you know to show you that it's never too late. And, so I think that's huge. And, I think to talk about it to tell people yes, I'm going to school you don't realize the people there that can support you in that.

Ashley said that her sister was a source of motivation:

I mean my family has always been supportive. My sister is three years older than me and you know she went to college and graduated in four years so she just did everything the right way I guess you could say. And, now she's a chiropractor. She did it all within you know seven years. So, I kind of felt like pressured like you know I need to something, too or I'm going to be the loser here.

Participants said they felt motivated to succeed because they wanted to set a good example for their children. Tia said her children were a significant reason she decided to attend college. Serena also felt more motivated to attend college because she had a new baby:

I had a newborn child and I guess you could say, I was a little more determined to finish school because of having the baby and the stuff before that and I wanted to finish college.



Ashley said when she had her child, she initially set aside her goal to attend college, but eventually knew she wanted to support her daughter and felt she needed to attend college to do that:

I was working two jobs. I was okay with that. I was okay with not being in school and after I had her, I knew like okay I have somebody I need to support and it's not just myself, I can't be selfish. So, that's when I decided I really need to set a goal and get there which is mainly just to get a degree.

Tia student said she felt motivated to succeed after talking with a professor about graduate school:

I've kind of decided on a masters and the reason why is because I really want to do law school, so I decided that I'm just going to apply and if I make it, I'll go and if not then I don't know if I'll go on. But, I've talked to her about that and my age is one thing which I know I'm not that old, but for a college campus 32 is like you know when everyone else is like 21, 22 and they're all ready getting their bachelor's degrees. And, that's with law school, I'm like gosh I don't know what I'm thinking, you know. Three years is not that long and that's when she's like oh no, you can do it and, you know, she even said you know outside of class if you want to meet and talk definitely I can.

Participants said they sacrificed higher grades so they could balance their responsibilities and manage their time. Lori said:

Well, I would like to say that I have straight As and you know that's not the case. I'm not happy with my GPA but I did the best that I was able to most of the time, sometimes, and probably not always.

Teresa said she did not feel that grades motivated her to succeed:

I realize in life, it's not about the GPA because so many of us go to school young and we or maybe it's really hard for us at that stage of our life even if we're trying. And, it's just we can't get [the GPA] up.

### *Intrinsic Motivation*

Students discussed their intrinsic motivation, including the desire to finish classes and their degree, their experiences with self-reliance, and that they enjoyed college and learning. Teresa described how she was personally motivated to succeed and finish a difficult class:

...there was a class I took this semester, it was over my head. The math was over my head. It was very stressful. I mean really it was a lot of anxiety. And, I had to find my own resources. I mean like I asked coworkers who I knew were engineers so I figured well you got to have some math so see if you can figure this

one out. I used former students who I found out after I was taking the class oh, you took the class two semesters ago, oh, well, can you help me understand this? Because I went to my professor and he couldn't break it down in a way that would make me understand it. I just couldn't do it so I just started using I mean I really networked. I mean I asked current students, I asked past students. I mean I just talked about it all the time with people at work and I'm like you get this, well okay then explain this to me because maybe you can give me one word that helps me to understand this. And, I put a lot of networking time into it.

Teresa said she considered dropping the class:

I just want to drop the class. I just want to drop the class. But, I knew if I dropped the class, I wouldn't be able to graduate and I'd have to eventually take it because it was a prerequisite. So, I couldn't drop the class.

Teresa described her feelings after she finished the course with a passing grade:

It was the most wonderful experience of my life...It was just...such a relief to have it over. It was like all my other classes I didn't feel that way but that class I truly felt like "What a relief." That is so behind me.

Teresa also explained what influenced her motivation to finish:

It was like every once in a while I did well. It was like 'Oh, I think I'm getting it' and then I'd get really kind of motivated and driven again. It was like a seesaw you know effect. It was like I'd go up and I'd be down because I'd get it and then I wouldn't get it. And, it was like this constant rollercoaster. But, when I got it, it was a great high because you just felt so proud of yourself that you figured it out.

All six students said that attending full-time made them feel more determined to finish college with a degree. Students felt motivated when they knew they could finish as quickly as possible. Pam said, "I don't want to be here for 10 years." Lori also said that finishing motivated her to succeed in her courses and said, "Just to finish I knew it was a motivation to be done. I had a goal to be done this semester and that's what I had to do." Tia said, "I would like to get done as soon as possible."

Teresa, like the other participants, said she made the decision to attend full time so she could finish. "I said I hated my job and I told my husband I will never get done if I keep going part time." Tia described the same experience:

Part time to me just seemed like chipping away at it too slowly. I'm the type that when I decide to do something, that kind of takes my whole focus. It's better that I do it all the way then part of the way.

Tia described her personal motivation, including what she described as personal determination. First, she described that she is an individual who likes to have something to look forward to:

I always have to have that next project that next something ahead that I'm looking forward to. And, college to me really does that. I'm able to see where I'm going... I am the kind of person that I'm never satisfied with just staying the same.

Tia shared that she wrote a paper in class about her personal determination to attend college. She explained that the class was assigned to write a paper about someone they considered a hero. Tia selected herself:

I really thought about who was my hero and it had to be me and I mean I've had other people enter my life like my sister you know who's always kind of there and I've had professors but when it came down to it, I've always the one to keep my own focus and I guess kind of pushed myself and that sort of thing. We discussed that a little bit in class beforehand just kind of like who you'd choose and some people kind of volunteered and after we wrote it, we read them. I didn't volunteer mine.

Participants said that despite having experienced obstacles, they enjoyed college, and their positive feelings about their classes kept them motivated. Lori summed up her perspective about college, "I love learning, like I said. I love new things."

Serena agreed:

I like to learn. I really enjoy it...What do I think about learning? Just taking in information that I didn't know about and applying it to life. Not just learning about something is like I know that.

Tia also enjoys learning:

I love the learning. I've learned so much more here than I did at the community college level. But, I would probably be a professional student if I could. If I could get paid to go to college, if that was my job, I definitely would because I enjoy the learning process of it.

Pam found that learning enriched her life:

I wish I had realized how much it was going to enrich my life. How many answers I would receive, personal answers, not just answers as far as academics.

Students explained that during their experience, they felt a variety of emotions, including passion, fear, stress, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. When asked to

choose one feeling associated with taking classes, all students said they enjoyed their academic experiences.

*Advice to Others*

All six participants offered advice about college and about following a dream to other students based on their own college academic and social experiences. Students offered college advice about classes, planning, research, and gaining support while attending college. Serena advised:

I would want them to actually read their book because everything is pretty much in the book. Like when you take finals, it's in the book. So, read it.

Ashley added:

You definitely need to go to all your classes. Sometimes that can make the grades different just by being there and showing up. That's one thing I've learned. I don't know. I don't know. Always turn in your work. Go to class and turn in your work. Ask for help if you need it.

All six participants emphasized the importance of planning and prioritization in their advice to others. Lori said a plan helps her stay on track:

Like it's very hard coming in here blind and then saying okay and that's just me how I am. I love things planned out. I love, you know, a schedule. I'll show you my calendar. If I don't have my calendar, I'm a chaotic person. I don't know what I'm doing, so I have to have a schedule. And, I think that just helps people physically and emotionally. If you map things out and you're on like a track then you would know. I think it would be so helpful. Like I've asked people when are you done, oh, I don't know. Like, really?

Teresa said:

Have a plan and to literally follow the plan. Don't let anything get in your way. Just keep pushing towards that plan. And, you know somebody told me once that you have to take one bite at a time. Like if you're eating an elephant, take one bite at a time. I hated that. I hated it. And, I look back and I'm like that's really what you have to do. It's like I really broke it out by semester and I'm like okay, I got one down. And, then I had another one down and then all of a sudden you realize oh, my gosh, I'm halfway done. And, so, if they really break it down just a little at a time, you can get to the end.

Pam offered advice about planning and time management:

That's something I learned in college actually was time management... I had to learn how to tell people no. That I always can't do all that people ask me to do. But, I also learned tactfully how to do that. I never said no to anybody and I've learned how to identify those things that are really necessary right now that need

to be taken care of and the things that I, without any guilt, no, I don't have the time for that right now and I'd love to do it, maybe next week or next month, we can do that.

Serena agreed that she would want students to know about time management and offered some suggestions for students with families and jobs:

Try to get a little bit of leeway where if you are a full-time student and work, try to get two days off consecutively. Maybe like a Friday, Saturday or a Sunday, Monday if you can so you can have at least one day you can provide to the family a whole day and then one day you can provide to your studies.

Ashley and Teresa shared their advice about getting support while in college.

Ashley recommended using and knowing what academic support is available:

I mean, definitely there's writing centers and even if you are a good writer, I think everybody should still go there. That's something I kind of learned. You know, just use all the resources that are available to you because a lot of people I don't think realize how much help is there if you need it and kind of use excuses but, you know, it's right there. You could've had the help.

Teresa agreed, and would encourage students to talk to an academic advisor:

And, I think really just having a good advisor that supports you. And, if you don't have the advisor that clicks for you, I think it's important to let the advisor know or let the school know I need another advisor because I think that's huge.

Ashley and Teresa also emphasized the importance of support systems. Teresa said:

It's your support system. I mean if you don't have someone to support you through it and it doesn't have to be financial support I mean it's just emotional support.

Ashley said:

Well, as long as they have help first to make sure that their child is taken care of, that to me is number one priority, and there are so many things out there that can help you know with daycare and stuff because a lot of people are afraid to go to school you know because they think I can't afford daycare and I can't go to school. I have to be home with the baby all day. But, a lot of people just don't realize how much you know is out there and how much support is out there for single mothers.

Participants shared advice they would offer students to follow their dreams, to explore a different path, to do what makes you happy, and to focus and go to college.

Teresa said her experience shaped the advice she would give her children to explore different life paths:

So, I think the experience has really let me to support my kids because it's like if my son decides not to go um if my son decides or my daughter decides not to go to college right away I mean I will definitely constantly encourage college, but, I guess I believe that by seeing my example, it's never too late to go and maybe you need the real world experience. So, and I think by me going through that, would my kids struggle with that? I think I can really support them and say this is not the right thing for you. I mean, I think it would be very hard for me not to have my kids go to college because you can't get anywhere without an education. I do believe you have to make your own mistakes in life and maybe by not having my parents push me that, obviously, all those things in my past have pushed me to this point today. And, there was a reason for that. I think if we're just patient with our kids and constantly encouraging them that that will help...an example for them so that when they decide at 19 not to go to school or something it's like okay, you think this is not the right decision for you but it's your decision, you deal with it. I'm always there to support you when you go back. Maybe you realize you need to go out there and realize an \$8.00 an hour job ain't gonna cut it. Work for a while. Get frustrated and then it will be your time to go. I think you need to get out into the real world and try different things. Maybe you want to be a welder or something. I don't know just try different things and see if that works for you. I think if you don't know what you want to do, if you're just doing it because oh, all my friends are going to college, I'm going to college. You're kind of like you're going with the flow. And, I think it's not the right decision for you at that stage of your life.

Tia offered the following advice:

I mean you have to do what makes you happy not necessarily just what's for the degree. Your degree has to be what you'll enjoy doing because if you don't enjoy it then that's a waste of your time.

Four participants said they would offer advice to stay focused on the goal of attending and graduating from college. Ashley offered advice to a neighbor who was not sure whether she wanted to attend college:

I have a neighbor who had been talking a lot too. She doesn't want to go to school and she's had a baby. She's only seventeen and she can go to Ambrose for free and I'm like GO and I mean I guess if she goes and drops out at all, she's done. But, you know, she doesn't realize how important it is and how much she really needs school and she's like if I'm almost eighteen I'm just going to get a different job. At eighteen I'll have more options. I'm like no. You go to school.

Pam added:

And the advice I would give is to don't lose sight of your goal, and although you're overwhelmed, not now but you sure will at some point, it will pass and will be worth it in the end.

Serena also shared:

I would tell them to hold on, keep fighting because you will see results. Obtain the degree. Then you would probably have the ball in your court where you can

make up your own schedule if you do get the job you're looking for or get a job with a schedule that works with you and your family life. And, if you do want to take your education farther than undergraduate, if you want to do a graduate, or self-worth and you can still probably get a job where you can make up your own hours. I'll say try to look at the big picture because it will be a big picture at the end.

Teresa summed up her advice, "Just keep pushing."

### *Summary*

Four major themes were presented in this chapter that reflect the academic and social experiences of six branch campus undergraduate students. The first theme, student background and prior experiences, included participant descriptions of their experiences prior to enrollment at the branch campus, including life experiences and community college experiences. The second theme, student transition, included student experiences with adjusting to the branch campus, including discovering options such as available majors, acquiring new awareness, deciding to attend full time, and paying for college. Student transition also included student experiences balancing multiple life priorities such as employment, family, distraction, support, and establishing priorities. The third theme included student descriptions about their experiences with the campus environment, social interactions and activities with peers and faculty, and academic experiences including assignments, learning, class formats, difficult subjects, and their feelings about classes. The final theme included student descriptions about their motivation, including external and internal sources of motivation, and advice they would offer to others based on their own successes and failures.

The data collected from this study illustrated the research participants' academic and social experiences while they attended college at a branch campus. This study also highlighted the journey that led these students to the branch campus, influenced their college choices and motivation, and revealed the importance of each student's total life biography as it related to her experiences as a nontraditional college student. Past research about nontraditional college students focused primarily on student deficits related to traditional students. This story provided a different perspective through the

perspectives of the participants, who defined and embraced themselves, and their journey, as nontraditional students. The next chapter will provide an analysis of these findings and discuss implications for practice and research about nontraditional college students.



## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to gather descriptive data about undergraduate college student experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest. This case study about branch campus undergraduate students challenged the way previous research categorized and described nontraditional students in comparison and in deficit to students with traditional characteristics and backgrounds. This case study conducted at WIU Quad Cities examined six undergraduate college students' experiences at a branch campus where nontraditional college experiences are more common.

In contrast to previous research that focused on nontraditional students' demographic characteristics, deficits compared to residential students, and their risk for attrition, this case study revealed that participants in this study possessed a rich, detailed biography of pre-college experiences, successes, and challenges as they transitioned to college, and experiences with academic and social engagement while enrolled at a branch campus. Although participants' background characteristics and experiences created challenges for their college success, this study revealed there is more to understand about the nontraditional college experience and personal determination. This case study revealed positive aspects of WIU Quad Cities students' academic and social experiences on a branch campus that college personnel should foster and promote for all students. Analysis of findings also revealed students' sense of motivation and ability to thrive and succeed in college. This chapter focuses on the analysis of findings that redefine and illustrate nontraditional experiences of undergraduate students who attend WIU Quad Cities.

#### *Redefining Nontraditional*

This case study revealed that students in this study defined the term “nontraditional” to include primarily their experiences and commitment to succeed rather

than their personal traits and characteristics as suggested in previous research. With the exception of age, students in this study referenced their experiences and motivation when they described the term “nontraditional.” Age is the only personal characteristic that coincides with definitions of nontraditional students in previous literature. Findings from this case study suggested two reasons to consider redefining students by their nontraditional experiences rather than by personal traits or characteristics.

The first reason to refer to students by their nontraditional experiences is to challenge negative assumptions in previous literature about nontraditional students. Previous literature suggested that use of the word “nontraditional” implies that higher education institutions do not value the characteristics of this group of students (Komives et al., 2003). In contrast to those negative perceptions, students in this study attributed many positive qualities to their college experiences. Students who attend a branch campus where their experiences are more common may tend to place more positive value on the word “nontraditional” and respect one another for their personal sacrifice, hard work, and personal determination.

As described in more detail later in this chapter, older college students in this study perceived that they learned more as older students, better appreciated their education, were more motivated, and felt proud of their accomplishments. Despite their positive experiences, this study showed that this group of students still perceived that attending college while younger is the preferred college pathway. Findings revealed that these students expressed regret that they did not attend college immediately after high school, and they encouraged their own children to attend college while they are young. Students with nontraditional experiences may fail to see how their struggles, challenges, and persistence prepare them to be more active in their college education, as described later in this chapter, and help them to better appreciate the value of attending college. The finding that college students in this study tended to devalue their characteristic of being an older student but valued their experiences suggests the need to redefine students

by their nontraditional experiences rather than by their nontraditional personal characteristics.

The second reason to define students by their nontraditional experiences is that students in this study and in previous research did not share similar characteristics that can be easily isolated and defined as “nontraditional.” In this study, even after I selected students based on age, gender, employment, having a dependent child, and living off campus, there were still characteristics that made them different from one another, including race, socio-economic background, and whether their parents attended college. Previous research also suggested that there may be overlap between traditional and nontraditional student characteristics, which is evident in the National Center for Education Statistics report that stated 75% of all college students today have a nontraditional characteristic (2002).

There was also variation within the characteristic of age. This study revealed two distinct age-based subsets of branch campus students with nontraditional experiences. The first group is composed of an older segment of students who are more focused on academics, more self-aware, have a portfolio of life experiences to draw upon, and are more self-guided in seeking resources and assistance. The second group is composed of younger segment of students who struggle to take care of young children and make few social connections on campus with classmates. These findings showed that what makes these two sub-sets of students unique are their life and college experiences, and that the characteristic of age is insufficient to define and understand students.

The findings of this case study revealed that life and college *experiences*, rather than student characteristics, should be defined as nontraditional. From this point forward, I will discontinue the use of the phrase “nontraditional students” to describe this group of undergraduate students. Instead, this chapter will focus on the analysis of findings that illustrate nontraditional *experiences* of these undergraduate student participants who

attended WIU Quad Cities, including Student Background and Prior Experiences, Student Transition, Student Engagement, and Student Motivation.

### *Student Background and Prior Experiences*

All participants in this study shared similar background and experiences prior to enrollment at the branch campus. In this section, I analyze data within the theme of Student Background and Prior Experiences, including their experiences within the categories of Life Experiences and Community College Experiences.

#### *Life Experiences*

This case study sought to describe, explain, and illustrate undergraduate student academic and social experiences at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest. This study found that students with nontraditional experiences in this study connected their early life experiences with their current college experiences. Babineau and Packard (2006) discussed the construction of identity based on past and current self.

Past self includes reflections about identity in the past, and current self includes the construction of identity in the present (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Expectations of parents and spouses influence choices made immediately after high school, and students in this study had limited access to role models who had attended or who valued going to college. Role models and social context are important to student identity, and “exposure to role models in similar situations” can encourage students to imagine themselves as college students (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Students who are first generation may be encouraged to follow the same career-focused path as their parents and to start life with building a family as their first priority. Students whose parents attended college may also give little thought about making their own decisions, because their parents also offer advice and expect them to follow their life path. Parents may offer students advice about whether to attend college based primarily on what they are familiar with in their own lives. With limited access to role models that attended college, first-generation students may begin life after high school with a focus on career and family. Students with parents

who attended college may begin life after high school with a focus on attending college, but may not have evaluated the decision as it relates to setting their own goals.

The desire to reject the expectations of others may be triggered when individuals become dissatisfied with their job or life circumstance. As individuals gain new information and are exposed to role models who attended college, they begin to first consider the possibility of attending college. Participants' rejection of past expectations by others and adoption of their own sense of purpose reflects a four-stage identity progression model for women as described by Helms (1990). In this model, women progress in their identity from conforming to societal views about gender roles, questioning status quo and seeking alternative information, redefining their own roles as women, and finally, "refusing to be bound by external definitions of womanhood" (p. 403).

Individuals may also begin to consider the benefits of college when they perceive an incongruity between life experiences and desire for personal fulfillment, desire to serve as role models for their children, and increased financial income. This incongruence is likely due to a lack of self-efficacy, defined as "the tendency for an individual to behave in ways that create, rather than simply respond to, educational and career choices" (Betz & Hackett, 1987, in Ancis & Phillips, 1996, p. 131). Lack of self-efficacy earlier in life is typical of women's identity development, as women earlier in life tend to conform to societal views about gender and hold a constructed view of women's roles (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992, as cited in ASHE-ERIC, 2003).

#### *Community College Experiences*

Consistent with current research, students in this study delayed and interrupted college enrollment due to pregnancy and so they could financially support their families. Students with nontraditional experiences may believe that college is not an option along with raising a child and keeping a job, and students feel pressure from society to raise children and conform to societal expectations to focus primarily on their children and not

on their own goals. Whether making the initial decision to attend college or to return to college, women with children must reconcile their gender expectations as mothers with their desire to pursue their college goals.

Student experiences while enrolled in community college may add to the continued debate discussed by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) about whether community college has a positive or negative impact on student aspirations. Although the community college serves as a pathway to transfer to a four-year institution, students in this study selected community college because they perceived it to be the only option that allowed them to balance priorities. For the student who ultimately seeks a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, community college may not provide academic and social preparation for their transfer to an upper division branch campus. Because students ultimately plan to transfer, students may see taking classes at the community college as necessary, yet a temporary task and therefore may not fully commit academically, make strong personal and social connections, or enjoy their community college experience. The community college may also attract such a broad group of students that it may be difficult to find peers with similar backgrounds or experiences. According to Astin (1993), "it is very difficult to create anything resembling a 'peer group' at a community college, in part because students have such a 'hodge-podge' of interests including a mix of students who attend full time or part time, and have varied background characteristics and life experiences" (p. 416).

Even though students in this study disliked community college experiences, took longer to complete their coursework, and lacked social connections, some students still persisted and transferred to the four-year institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that initial community college attendance, delayed enrollment, and greater amount of time needed to complete a baccalaureate degree program had a negative impact on student persistence. However, as also suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), the community college experience serves as a vehicle for students to realize their own

genuinely held aspirations to earn a four-year degree independently from parents and others. The community college experience may be less important as individual determination. As mentioned in greater detail later in this chapter, determination unimpeded by external influences may be the most important factor in student persistence.

Identity development is a lifelong process during which individuals develop a sense of self, who they are, and who they want to become (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). As individuals through their lives after high school graduation, they become exposed to new role models, information, and opportunities that help them think critically about the expectations of others and move toward empowering themselves to set their own life course. According to Sanford, identity development is the process of becoming more complex in one's personal and social identities (Sanford, 1967, as cited in Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003). Even with their own families, children, and jobs, some students decide to make room for college in their already busy lives. The next section discusses and analyzes findings from student experiences with transition to a four-year branch campus.

### *Student Transition Experiences*

All student participants transitioned and adjusted to various aspects of the branch campus. In this section, I will analyze the theme of Student Transition and participants' experiences within the categories Balancing Multiple Priorities and Discovering Options.

#### *Balancing Multiple Identities*

The undergraduate students in this study balanced multiple identities, and their identity as a college student overlapped with their identity as an employee, parent, child, and spouse or partner. This suggests that students with nontraditional experiences may struggle to fulfill the expectations and priorities of each role, and experience stress, distraction, a sense of support, and a variety of other feelings associated with balancing their responsibilities. As reflected in research, students who balance multiple identities

may experience barriers that result from the situations they face, barriers of attitude, and barriers put in place by the institution when they attempt to balance a variety of conflicting priorities and needs (Fairchild, 2003b).

One situational barrier for students in this study was the need to financially support their families while they also paid college tuition. Students with nontraditional experiences may be financially dependent upon employment income to support their families and to pay for college, and continue employment while enrolled in college. As reflected in the literature, students from low- or middle-income families are more likely to remain employed while they attend college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Studies indicate that employment off-campus may have a negative impact on student persistence and degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However finances may also incentivize students to succeed. Because of their employment experiences, some students may be increasingly motivated to find better jobs and perceive that a college degree will help them achieve this goal. According to Paulsen and St. John (2002), this is especially true for students with nontraditional experiences. “Students who entered college through non-traditional routes are more motivated” and through past experiences with unfulfilling employment, “learn that education is more important than they thought” (p. 217).

This study also revealed that students in this study faced situational barriers as they balanced multiple life priorities. They sacrificed time with their families to study, complete assignments, attend class, and participate in certain activities. Students balancing multiple priorities may also intentionally accept lower grades so they can manage their time and spend time with family. A study conducted about outside effort effects on academic effort and grades by Soren and Bigatti (2006) found that family activities were not associated with course effort or final grades, but that student self-reports indicating that students received lower grades because of family responsibilities contradicted these findings. The findings of this case study suggest students in this study made a conscious decision to decrease academic effort and accepted lower grades in



order to accommodate multiple demands on their time. In addition, similar to their employment decisions, participants were inspired to attend and succeed in college to support and act as a role model for their children.

Dispositional barriers include role conflict, overload, and contagion (Home, 1998). This study found that participants with multiple priorities experienced role conflict when they attempted to prioritize their roles as parents, students, and employees. As a result, participants were sometimes unable to focus and felt a sense of overload, struggle, stress, and frustration, especially early in their college experiences. Participants in this study also experienced role contagion when they were preoccupied with one role while completing another. Students in this study experienced role contagion when they used breaks between classes for completing errands such as grocery shopping, or driving their children to school instead of studying or other college activities.

#### *Discovering Options*

This study revealed that students with nontraditional experiences may face institutional barriers when investigating the options available to them at the branch campus and may lack information about available academic majors and class offerings. Students who lack role models or resources may not pursue researching information themselves because they do not know what questions to ask. Students in this study benefited from intentional and personalized advisement, and when connected to an advisor, felt a sense of direction and ability to accomplish their goals.

This study also showed that connection to academic advisement and degree planning may help students choose and transition into their major, and also help them realize it is realistic for them to attend college full time instead of part time. Academic advisement helped students in this study to assess their responsibilities and make adjustments to employment and family life to accommodate full-time enrollment when they could predict their schedules and course load. Advising programs are one strategy at the receiving institution to facilitate and assist transfer students to make a good start at a

new institution, (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Students who receive advisement may feel more motivated when they have a plan because they can organize their schedules, prioritize responsibilities, and make adjustments. Planning with an academic adviser may also assist students with financial planning. Research suggests that adults “take an interest in higher education when they have determined that there will be a return on their investment of time, money, and effort” (Tharp, 1988, as cited in Fairchild, 2003b).

### *Student Engagement Experiences*

All study participants engaged with the campus, with others, and in various experiences while they were enrolled at the branch campus. In this section, I analyze the theme Student Engagement Experiences, including their experiences within the categories Campus Environment, Social Interaction, and Academic Experiences.

#### *Campus Environment*

This study found that students in this study perceived the branch campus environment as welcoming because of smaller class size, flexible class schedules, friendly staff and faculty, and because of connections to peers with shared backgrounds and experiences. However, findings from this study suggest that older and younger students may have different experiences from one another.

As mentioned earlier, this study revealed that students were aware of and identified within two age-based subsets of students with nontraditional experiences at WIU Quad Cities. There are some benefits for these two groups of students when they interact with each other on campus. Younger college students may benefit by learning from older students through classroom discussion about their experiences. Older students may benefit from serving as mentors to younger students and enjoy interacting with younger students. This study revealed that this bi-modal distribution of age was most challenging for younger students in this study, who perceived they had little in common with older students. Younger students with nontraditional experiences may be less inclined to participate in class because they have yet to develop self-confidence, and

older students may dominate class discussion because they are more likely to share and draw upon their personal experiences.

This study showed that older students who delay enrollment before attending college may be more committed to their education and learn more than they would have if they had entered college immediately after high school. Older students may have an increased sense of academic self-confidence with the passage of time, accumulated experience, and ability to focus on goals. Over time, older students experience opportunities to reclaim, reject, or construct new identities, and to expand their identities (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Younger students may remain in the midst of earlier stages of identity development and have yet to examine past sense of self as part of their identity development and college experience.

This study found that older students in this study felt more successful on a branch campus because campus personnel, faculty, and other students perceived nontraditional experiences as the norm. Because older students have more developed experiences, personal relationships, and supports off-campus, they have both experience and support structures to feel empowered and confident in college (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Younger nontraditional students are simultaneously attempting to develop these same experiences, relationships, and supports while they also attend college. This study revealed that the environment at WIU Quad Cities may fail to support younger students with nontraditional experiences who lack experience and self-efficacy that develop over a period of time.

The WIU Quad Cities campus environment may also fail to meet the expectations of students seeking opportunities for on-campus social interaction and activities such as athletics. Students in this study seeking this type of interaction found the academics-focused branch campus to be sterile and uninviting, and as one participant described, too “business like.” A younger student with nontraditional experiences, like one participant in this study, may choose to transfer to a traditional, residential campus seeking the right

fit. Although students seeking a four-year degree who start at a two-year community college plan to transfer, some students with nontraditional experiences may transfer across institutions to find the right institutional fit, especially if they struggle to reconcile their nontraditional experiences with their desire to participate in social activities more typical of a residential campus. This study affirmed a previous assertion that students who engage in multiple transfers in their college careers are often experimenting to gauge their abilities and to discover their interests and talents (Manski, 1989, in Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011).

This study illustrates that although students in this study generally found the branch campus to be conducive to their multiple priorities, remnants of traditional curriculum presented challenges for them to achieve their goals. The internship is a curricular requirement that may reflect a preference for the traditional college experience that includes an employment-based capstone that exposes students to the workforce and opportunities to apply their learning in a real-world setting. Students with nontraditional experiences may already possess professional experience, and the internship presents an added burden to a student who already balances several priorities and responsibilities. The internship requirement also affirms that institutions still consider the traditional student experience and population as the norm (Komives et al., 2003). Even though institutions may serve primarily nontraditional students, elements of traditional college experiences remain in the curriculum, and may force students make impossible or undesirable adjustments in their lives or to their initial academic plan. This study suggests that when students modify their academic plan, they may default to general, flexible majors instead of their preferred discipline-specific major that would better prepare them for their chosen field.

### *Social Connectedness*

Despite positive perceptions about the campus environment, findings revealed that students in this study spent little time on campus when they were not in class, which

is typical of commuter institutions (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Students with nontraditional experiences who attend branch campuses may have limited opportunities for social connections with other individuals because they are primarily focused on academics while on campus and focus on their jobs and families while off campus. The classroom may be the primary place where students are able to meet other students, interact with other students, form groups for projects, and form friendships. Students may have little interaction with peers outside of class, with the exception of e-mail communication and online social network sites. While off campus, branch campus students maintain social connections to family, friends, and co-workers who are not part of their college life. Although previous research may be accurate that students do not spend a great deal of time on campus, this study refutes any assertion that students are not engaged socially with other individuals at home, at work, and in the community.

This study also found that participants were very engaged with faculty. The types of interactions found in this study align with two types of faculty interactions described by Kuh and Hu (2001). Students in this study engaged in substantive interaction with faculty, including talking with and asking questions about course content. They also engaged in out-of-class contact with faculty, including conference travel and guidance about graduate school, and considered faculty their mentors because of these interactions. Findings showed that participants felt they had a higher level of confidence than they would have when they were younger to initiate interactions with faculty, contribute to discussion, and seek assistance.

Even though participants were socially engaged with peers, people off campus, and the faculty, this study found that students perceived that they did not engage in social activities. This finding coincides with research about nontraditional college students' social interaction styles, with just 46.8% of students described as socially active compared to 80% of traditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Findings of this study revealed that participants did not spend time on campus outside of class because

their focus was on off-campus activities. However, this suggests that students' perception about social activities may be influenced by their interpretation of what it means to be social in college. College students may primarily define their involvement in social activities through their assumptions about how society defines college activity on residential campuses, such as activity in student organizations or athletics. Although students may perceive and describe they have no social life in college, findings reveal they may actually be involved in off-campus activities such volunteerism, and participants socialized regularly with their families and co-workers. It is possible that participants framed their social experiences within the context of a traditional college experience and thus perceived that they were lacking social interaction.

#### *Academic Experiences*

This study shows that students in this study participated in academic experiences with course assignments, engaged learning, class format, and feelings about classes. Students in this study participated in academics by taking classes, including coursework and class participation, and enjoyed applying what they had learned in life to their courses. Findings showed that students with nontraditional experiences may especially enjoy class assignments when they feel they can apply new learning to their lives, and when they can apply their experiences to new learning. This finding coincides with Schreiner (2010), who found that students thrive when they have opportunities to meaningfully process material, make connections between what they already know, are interested in, and what needs to be learned. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported the benefits of active learning, including positive acquisition of course content. This study confirmed that collaborative group work appears to be especially beneficial for branch campus students, and facilitates social interactions with peers and sharing of ideas.

Students in this study who took videoconference classes at a branch campus said they were less engaged in class because they felt uncomfortable speaking into microphones and because technical problems made it difficult to listen and hear both

locations in the videoconference. Although students may be academically successful and distance-learning modalities such as videoconferencing are shown to have no negative impact on student learning, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that current studies do not consider the reasons students take distance-learning courses. At WIU Quad Cities, students took videoconference courses because face-to-face options were not available to fulfill their degree requirements. The participants who took videoconference courses said they preferred active learning; however, they selected a videoconference course with lecture style instruction because it was the only option available to them. Students in this study frequently encountered technical interruption during their classes. Even though Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that a skilled lecture could be effective, this study found that technical interruptions experienced by participants combined with less active learning created a less desirable learning environment, and fewer positive interactions between students and their peers and faculty.

Branch campus students in this study associated both positive and negative feelings with taking classes, such as enjoyment and passion about learning, along with stress and anxiety. This study suggests that math courses and requirements may present a specific challenge for branch campus students, and students may avoid math requirements by changing their major. This finding is consistent with research by Astin (1993) who pointed to a decline in student confidence about their math abilities. When a student struggles with math and avoids taking math courses, this has a negative impact on their satisfaction and involvement in college (Astin, 2003).

#### *Student Motivation*

All students in this study discussed sources of motivation, and the lessons they learned and would share with other college students. This section analyzes the category Student Motivation, and student experiences within categories of their Extrinsic Motivation, Intrinsic Motivation, and Advice to Others.

### *Extrinsic Motivation*

Women tend to be more driven by external and situational factors to attend college (Aslanian, 2001, Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 1997; Kasworm, 2003, as cited in Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). This study also found that students in this study were motivated in part by external influences to attend and succeed in college. As described earlier, this study showed that families are a primary influence on students' lack of initial motivation to attend college, and confirmed other findings that parents who do not attend college can serve as an obstacle for first-generation students (Brooks-Terry, 1988). Students received messages about norms, standards, and expectations from their parents about how to be a successful adult (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). This study found that students in this study whose parents did not attend college may have lacked the tools or social capital to pass on to their children the value of attending college. Based on this finding, it is possible that parents of students who delay college enrollment may not encourage their children to attend college (a) because they did not experience college themselves, (b) because of gender expectations, and (c) because of lack of information.

Families are not always a negative influence on student motivation. This research found that participants' families of creation, especially students' own children, could be a significant source of extrinsic motivation to attend and succeed in college. Students who want to attend college both to obtain a job to financially support their families may have a strong desire to set a good example for their children. College student parents also pass along "higher educational expectations for their own child" and "active modeling of the student role" (Ricco et al., 2009, p. 101).

This study suggested that other external factors contributed to student determination. Participants' academic determination was positively influenced by employment possibilities, including the prospect of higher income, gaining qualifications, career advancement, and working in a personally fulfilling career. Students in this study were less motivated specifically by grades, and instead by their desire to meet degree



requirements. This suggests that students may be motivated for success when they achieve a milestone of completing coursework and when they anticipate the rewards of finishing their degree. Even though students with nontraditional experiences are defined in current research by their part-time status, students in this study felt more motivated and determined to succeed when they attended full time. “Finishing faster” is a source of extrinsic motivation for students at WIU Quad Cities, and coincides with research findings that indicate college students are more likely to persist when their time to degree is not prolonged (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### *Intrinsic Motivation*

Students in this study espoused a strong desire to finish classes, and their experiences with self-reliance and personal enjoyment of learning kept them motivated. This suggests the possibility that students who are the first in their families to attend college appear to take more ownership and pride in their decision to attend college. This confirms findings in previous research. When college students who are parents emerge as the first in their families to attend college, they become intrinsically motivated to attend college to fulfill their intellectual curiosity (Ricco et al., 2009).

One study found that men more than women cited personal reasons for attending college (Mohney & Anderson, 1988). However, college students who are also mothers are more likely to have an intrinsic orientation as a college student (Ricco et al., 2009). Findings in this study confirmed that women who are also mothers appear to have a strong, intrinsic desire to succeed, and they find ways to adapt and overcome challenges through strategies such as time management and learning from experience. According to Schreiner (2010), students who thrive in college have “a positive perspective on life” (p. 6) and the ability to adapt to challenging situations. They also have a greater ability to develop long-term plans and goals, to envision their future, and to understand they must take steps to achieve their goals (Schreiner, 2010).

“Thriving in college requires the development of healthy attitudes toward self as well as toward the learning process” (Schreiner, 2010, p. 5). It is possible that students with nontraditional experiences appear to thrive because they maintain a positive perspective while enrolled in college. Students in this study experienced challenges and barriers to success, along with feelings of fear, stress, and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. However participants also appeared to espouse the ability to succeed academically, manage time, stay motivated, and effectively plan, all of which are key characteristics of thriving according to Schreiner (2010). Despite encountering obstacles and negative feelings, students in this study who learned from experiences, embraced both academic success and failure, and stayed focused on their internal desire to achieve a college degree were able to thrive in college. Existing research about students with nontraditional experiences may have failed to account for the influence of the ability to thrive on student persistence. Although findings from previous studies may predict that students with similar background characteristics or experiences are likely to fail, this study suggests that the ability to thrive may better predict whether any student will succeed in college.

#### *Advice to Others*

Students in this study recognized they had a unique ability to thrive, and upon reflecting on experiences, were able to translate their academic and social experiences into thoughtful advice and strategies for success. This suggests that student thriving occurs when a student demonstrates academic determination, which is characterized by investment of effort, time management ability, motivation to succeed, and intentional pursuit of goals (Schreiner, 2010). Through the advice they would offer other college students with similar experiences, participants connected their own successes to experiences with intentional decision-making, time management, level of effort, and personal motivation.

Students in this study were able to thrive and may have possessed the ability to translate their own successes into advice for other students because they placed a high value on the benefits and opportunities they had or would receive from attending college, and wanted other individuals to know that achieving goals is possible. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, students in this study engaged with other students often through mentoring relationships. Palmer (1998) noted that faculty mentors teach others based on who they are. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) indicated that faculty mentors take an autobiographical approach to mentoring, and draw upon own identity to guide students. Students in this study with nontraditional experiences appeared to also mentor others based on who they are, and drew upon their own identity and past academic and social experiences when they offered advice to their peers.

#### *Conclusion*

This chapter analyzed findings from a case study that examined undergraduate student academic and social experiences at a branch campus, WIU Quad Cities. Findings in this chapter emphasized the importance of redefining students by their nontraditional experiences rather than by their personal characteristics. This chapter also discussed findings that illustrated participants' life experiences and community college experiences, transition to college, experiences with academic and social engagement, and their motivation. The next chapter will consider these findings and provide recommendations about how to foster success for students with nontraditional experiences who attend WIU Quad Cities.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The analysis of findings presented in Chapter 5 redefined students by their nontraditional experiences and addressed student academic and social experiences framed as four themes within a case study: Student Background and Prior Experiences, Student Transition, Student Engagement, and Student Motivation. This chapter provides implications for practice based on the findings of this case study. This case study provided an in-depth investigation of undergraduate student academic and social experiences while enrolled at a branch campus.

This case study was an “empirical inquiry that investigated contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within real life context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Based on Yin (2009), this study explained, described, and illustrated experiences of nontraditional students at a branch campus. Through this discovery, college personnel can understand and contribute to better understanding about nontraditional student experiences that are currently missing from the research. This case study examined a sample of students whose college experiences were nontraditional. The results of this study provide insight about students with nontraditional academic and social experiences.

This chapter provides implications for student affairs practice and higher education policy and includes implications, approaches, and strategies to promote self-efficacy for students with nontraditional experiences, strategies for students with multiple priorities, academic and social engagement, and redefines nontraditional experiences. These implications also reflect the rationale for conducting this study, which was to shed light on the ways college personnel can focus efforts to meet the needs and embrace student experiences previously ignored by higher education, add to understanding about how WIU Quad Cities’ undergraduate students experience academics and social activities during their college years, and provide insight about whether current best practices and student development theories are applicable to nontraditional college experiences.

*Promoting Self-Efficacy for Students with  
Nontraditional Experiences*

This study revealed that students in this study with nontraditional experiences struggled to reconcile their parents' expectations for career and college with their own personal goals after graduating from high school. High school graduates who are the first generation of their families to attend college lack experiences, role models, and self-efficacy to make autonomous decisions based on their own interests and goals. They may also lack enough information to make informed decisions about their desired life path. High school graduates whose parents attended college may also lack self-efficacy, and may attend college without considering their own goals for the future.

Colleges and universities often provide career counseling for already enrolled college students. Although participants in this study learned about their interests and goals through various life experiences with family, community college, and employment, they wished they had been able to make the decision to pursue a four-year degree earlier. Colleges and universities, in partnership with high schools, should consider ways to increase student access to employment experiences, job shadowing, and dual-enrollment opportunities for students to sample college coursework.

Career counseling for students is an important element of the student experience as students separate their identity from their parents' expectations and move toward self-efficacy. WIU Quad Cities should design programs and workshops that encourage students to engage in career-related reflection, maximize the career staff available to assist students, and collaborate with other offices such as academic advisement to provide career planning and assistance for students (Brown, 2004).

Although it may be of value to access students earlier to inform them about college opportunities, it should not be to the detriment of natural development and life exploration. This study revealed that through life experiences with family, community college, and employment, these students realized their own goals and took ownership of

college-related decisions. College students may benefit from opportunities to explore other aspects of life prior to enrollment in college. Through personal failures, struggles, and exposure to new ideas, students can gain clearer perspectives about their goals and how to balance these with other life priorities.

This study also revealed that students in this study whose parents expected them to enroll in college immediately after high school might have lacked ownership of their experiences; some reported wandering through college to find the right major or to find the right college because they were motivated primarily based on the expectations of others. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), first-generation students derive benefits in learning and cognitive development, and “appear to derive greater benefits than other students in internal locus of attribution for academic success” (p. 625). This study revealed the students in this study who struggled to convince others and proved that college was the right decision had a stronger sense of purpose and determination. College personnel should begin to examine ways to foster a stronger internal locus of control for students who wander, struggle to find the right fit, and lack a sense of purpose in college.

#### *Students with Multiple Priorities*

The college students in this study with nontraditional experiences struggled to balance multiple life roles and priorities. Institutions must consider ways to foster undergraduate student success with programs and services that support multiple identities. Multiple identity development also addresses the ways individuals consider and negotiate their multiple identities (Komives et al., 2003). Because social identities of students with nontraditional experiences are interconnected and complex, theorists such as Weber (2001) argued that these identities cannot be separated and should be understood as a collective identity. Institutions must address the unique needs of students who balance multiple life priorities and should provide career counseling, time

management strategies, and development opportunities for students who may be conflicted between roles and responsibilities.

Institutions must also consider ways to integrate students' multiple life roles and responsibilities. Student participants with young children discussed challenges related to balancing childcare with academic demands on their time. Although family provided some support for childcare, students in this study struggled to find time to study outside the classroom. Students who care for young children experience higher role conflict and demand (Home, 1998). They also experience higher incidences of stress, dissatisfaction, and difficulty meeting academic and personal needs (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999; Leavitt, 1989; Thacker & Novak, 1991; Scott et al., 1996, as cited in Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002). On-campus childcare or partnerships with childcare providers would provide students with support they need to focus on academics.

This study revealed that participants spent very little time on campus because they divided their time between college, family, and employment. Institutions that serve students with multiple priorities should consider ways to integrate children, family, employment, and social experiences with the college experience. In addition to providing childcare, college personnel should consider providing programs that integrate families into on-campus social experiences. This type of opportunity would foster students' desire to serve as role models for their children, while simultaneously exposing a younger generation to the opportunities that college provides.

On-campus employment opportunities should be provided at an institution that serves students with multiple life roles. On-campus employment lends students additional opportunities to interact with faculty, staff, and other students, and to learn more about resources available on campus. On-campus employment would also fulfill students' need to financially support their families and has been shown to have a more positive effect on student success than off-campus employment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Existing research defines “nontraditional students” as a population by their part-time enrollment status (Glaser-Raymo, 2009; Ishmael, 2009; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Findings from this case study revealed that students in this study with nontraditional college experiences chose part-time attendance for two reasons. Similar to other studies, findings showed that students in this study chose to attend college part-time because they were “married, living off-campus, working, and financially independent” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 222). Findings also suggested that students with nontraditional experiences might feel that part-time attendance is their only option until they receive more intentional academic advisement. This study found that academic advisement was a critical element in participants’ decision to attend college, and advisement helped them realize that full-time attendance was feasible, even while they continued to balance multiple life priorities. When students in this study worked with an advisor to develop a degree plan that outlined how long it would take them to finish as a full-time student, they felt more motivated to commit to a full-time class schedule. Full-time college attendance has a positive effect on aspirations and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and academic advisors who serve students with nontraditional experiences should (a) be cautious to avoid assumptions that nontraditional students want to attend college part-time, and (b) be aware that full-time attendance has the potential to increase students’ motivation to achieve their goals.

Institutions that attract and serve students with nontraditional college experiences should align class schedules to maximize students’ ability to attend full-time and accelerate their degree. This study showed that the notion of finishing college sooner motivated these students to stay enrolled and to complete their degrees. Accelerated degree programs have become a growing part of the national conversation and involve accelerated course sequencing and expanding the academic calendar, which may minimize costs for students (University Business, 2010). Accelerated programs that



maintain academic standards are appropriate to consider, especially for students who take time away from other priorities such as family and employment to attend college.

#### *Academic and Social Engagement*

This study found that the majority of on-campus social interactions for students in this study occurred in the classroom, and they spent little time socializing when they were not in class. This section identifies strategies to promote social integration both inside and outside the classroom through the establishment of cohorts, relevant social opportunities and programming, and establishment of peer connections and mentoring. Student involvement in campus academic and social activities eases the transition into college for students (Perna, 2005).

This study found that these students took advantage of breaks between classes to study, use campus resources such as computers or the library, and to interact with peers and faculty. Colleges and universities should schedule courses and programming to maximize time on campus, while respecting that the time should be strategically placed for convenience and with respect to students' other priorities. Institutions might consider the implementation of strategically placed breaks between classes to promote interaction with others on campus and to allow students time to access resources such as advising and computer labs. College personnel should also avoid assumptions that class schedules should remain lean and class focused with no social opportunities because students have multiple priorities.

Academic and social integration are critical factors for college student success and may be even more important for employed students with lower socio-economic status (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Course schedules should include sufficient time between courses, such as a "common hour," so that students have an opportunity to remain on campus and increase their opportunities to make social connections with others and to access campus resources. Especially for students who balance multiple priorities,

learning occurs when they are engaged in social experiences while enrolled in college (Lundberg, 2003).

This study revealed that participants remained connected to other students on campus when they encountered their peers in multiple classes. This study also found that peer interaction helped participants connect with others to share ideas and support one another, and helped ease the transition into academics at the branch campus. Shared activities, courses in common with peers, and other support systems are a few examples of support mechanisms that should be in place to facilitate the success of nontraditional students on a branch campus (Lucas & Robinson, 2001; Lundberg, 2003). According to Wolf-Wendel (2003), women especially have a need to feel connected to their institutional culture. Establishment of a cohort that navigates through courses in common is one method to foster social connection and a sense of place (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

In addition to sharing courses with peers, certain types of assignments helped students in this study to maintain peer connections. Group work facilitates social connections within the classroom and is particularly helpful in connecting students who are shy and in promoting collaboration. Group work participation should also extend outside the classroom to allow students the opportunity to collaborate before or after class and during breaks. Although students in this study discussed certain challenges associated with ensuring that all students contribute and the difficulty of coordinating schedules, faculty should avoid assumptions that it is not feasible for students with multiple priorities to collaborate outside of class.

Findings of this study revealed that students in this study enjoyed and benefitted from opportunities to integrate past and current employment experiences in the classroom, and were hindered when course or degree requirements impinged on their ability to maintain employment and financially support their families. The classroom should include class activities and assignments that allow students to draw upon past

experiences to make learning more meaningful for them and that create opportunities to apply new knowledge. This study revealed a symbiotic relationship between applying new learning to make meaning of past experiences, and applying past experiences to make meaning of new information.

Traditional internships that require a student to discontinue any of their multiple life priorities are a detriment to student success. Required internships are incompatible with students' already busy schedules, and internships may be a duplication of previous employment experience. Institutions that serve students with nontraditional experiences must find ways to maintain the academic integrity of their curriculum while also providing flexible options for students to integrate past experience (Compton et al., 2003).

This study found that participants preferred engaging in face-to-face classroom instruction by a faculty member who is physically present in the classroom. Videoconferencing technology that is unstable and video conferencing instruction that is not engaging interferes with student learning. If institutions use distance-learning technology, they should consider collaborative and active instructional strategies such as integrating group work, time for questions, and integration of asynchronous communication to enhance students' experience and engagement with the course (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions must also ensure that equipment works so that students can see, hear, and interact with remotely located instructors and classmates. Studies indicate that distance learners can achieve academic challenge and reflective thinking (Kuh, 2009) and that student interaction with faculty has a positive impact on cognitive skills and growth, persistence, and student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Findings show that students in this study interacted with faculty when they felt the faculty were approachable and they cared about their students. Students in this study were more comfortable communicating verbally and electronically when they felt that

their professors were approachable. Participants defined faculty as approachable when professors knew students by name, when professors were available, and when they appeared to enjoy their jobs. Students in this study also benefitted from faculty they perceived to be mentors and experts in their field. These findings confirm that institutions must find opportunities to support faculty professional development that includes awareness of pedagogy that supports nontraditional students, sensitivity to nontraditional student experiences and characteristics, and ways to promote faculty time to interact with nontraditional students inside and outside the classroom.

This study found that students in this study felt connected to others because of small class sizes. These students associated smaller campus and class sizes with their ability to make personal connections with peers, staff, and faculty. These students also felt supported by faculty and staff who understood students' nontraditional experiences and who called them by their first names. "Efforts must be made to ensure that the commuter student feels welcome and that he or she belongs on campus" (Andreas, 1983, p. 19). These can include efforts by academic affairs to provide professional development for faculty regarding students with nontraditional experiences, creation of informal spaces for faculty and student interaction, involvement by students in university governance, and involvement by faculty in student organizations (Andreas, 1983).

#### *Embracing Students' Nontraditional Experiences*

Researchers can address problems created by characterizing students with nontraditional experiences as atypical by embracing this group of students by understanding their history or by gaining more insight about how student characteristics contribute positively to their college experiences (Komives et al., 2003; Ogren 2003). Unlike other research frames, this embraced perspective looks beyond the challenges of what it means to balance employment with college life, and considers that embracing college identity has positive outcomes for student success. This section recommends redefining college students with nontraditional experiences through their own words,

provides suggestions about changing the perspectives of college personnel regarding students with nontraditional experiences, and highlights the need for future research that places value on some aspects of the nontraditional experience that have been stigmatized by higher education as negative or undesirable.

Findings from this case study illustrated that branch campus undergraduate students in this study defined their experiences as nontraditional and associated several positive qualities to their nontraditional experience. Researchers should define students by their experiences in and out of the classroom. Students with nontraditional experiences navigate a winding pathway of experiences throughout their life cycle (Schuetze & Slowey 2002). The available literature on winding pathways focuses primarily on student enrollment patterns, including delayed enrollment (Compton et al., 2006; NCES, 2002; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007) or part-time enrollment (Glaser-Raymo, 2009; Ishmael, 2009; Knepfelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Paulsen & St. John, 2002) and how these patterns contribute to deficiencies and college attrition. As discussed earlier, findings from this study reveal that, although challenges are associated with delayed and part-time enrollment, there are life experiences that foster continued development prior to enrolling in college. College personnel must understand the value of nontraditional journeys that students take in lieu of full-time college enrollment after high school, and discover ways to empower students' ability to apply past life experience to their academic and social experiences.

This study found that students in this study recognized two age-based subsets of students with nontraditional experiences. The first group is an older segment of students who are more focused on academics, more self-aware, have a portfolio of life experiences to draw upon, and are more self-guided in seeking resources and assistance. The second group is a younger segment of students who struggle to take care of young children and make few social connections on campus with classmates. Although the characteristic of age is insufficient to define students as nontraditional, the age can serve as a valuable cue

for college personnel to work with students to assign peer mentors, especially when there are opportunities to integrate students' real world experiences such as employment and family life into class projects or opportunities to ease new student college transition. College personnel must also maintain awareness that even though older students may come to college with a portfolio of experiences, they should not assume that students are versed in how to navigate college resources, opportunities, and academics (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Findings from this study indicated that student participants did not define their experiences by their commute to campus, the location of their home, or where they parked their car. Previous research viewed commuting to class as a nontraditional experience because it is different from traditional students who live in residence halls (Andreas, 1983; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Kodama, 2002). Defining students by their method of transport to college is problematic for two reasons. First, there is an overlap between students with a more traditional college experiences and those with nontraditional experiences who live off campus. Second, findings from this study suggest there is an overemphasis on the commute to campus for students with nontraditional experiences. Driving to campus and finding a parking spot is equivalent to a residential student walking to class by navigating sidewalks. If higher education institutions believe that driving and parking are a challenge for students, this has the potential to supersede more substantial conversations about student learning and engagement. Higher education research must divert the conversation from commuter logistics and toward a focus on how to promote and integrate social and academic engagement experiences on campus and off campus.

In addition to commuting to campus, higher education perceives negatively several other nontraditional experiences. As discussed earlier, students and society place a negative view of delayed enrollment and a higher value on immediate enrollment into college following high school graduation. However, this study revealed that students in

this study experienced a positive transition from making decisions based on the expectations of others into an increased sense of self-efficacy and identity that caused them to question others' expectations and consider misalignments between their life choices and their identity and goals. Because of delayed enrollment, students rejected past roles that were incongruent with their constructed self, confronted societal views about gender, questioned the status quo, and redefined themselves as women (Helms, 1990). This finding embraces nontraditional experiences by recognizing and including branch campus students' college life biography as an important part of their past and current identity and development as a college student.

Students in this study associated their nontraditional experiences with several positive benefits. As a result of life experiences, students gained confidence that translated into class participation and engagement in class discussion. As discussed earlier, students may also learn more in the classroom through their ability to relate past experience with new knowledge. Participants in this study valued their education for two reasons: first, because they compared it to less desirable past experiences and second, because they were personally financially invested in their success. Students in this study admired themselves and other students with nontraditional experiences for their perseverance and ability to successfully balance multiple life priorities.

Despite the fact that these students communicated several positive benefits from their nontraditional experiences, this study found that students with nontraditional experiences expressed admiration and preference for younger students who enroll in college immediately after high school, encouraged their own children to attend college immediately after high school, and wished they had been able to attend college earlier in life. This case study confirms previous research study findings that traditional, residential experiences of younger college students are the preferred and privileged college pathway.

The findings of this study suggest that college personnel must raise their own awareness about personally held assumptions that young, residential, traditional college experiences are the most desirable pathway through college. Robinson (1999) asserted that personal assumptions limited and hindered the ability to understand contradictory and unexplained events. College personnel, especially those whose own college experiences were traditional, must recognize the privileged status of traditional college experiences and raise their own awareness to advocate for change in support of students' nontraditional experiences and identities. To advocate for change in institutional policies and practices, individuals must "raise awareness and reevaluate the dominant value system that operates within American culture" (Watt, 2007, p. 115).

#### *Future Research*

This study revealed that students in this study defined themselves by their experiences and associated these experiences with their ability to learn, engage, and persist in college. Future research about college students must shift the conversation away from defining students by their demographic characteristics in order to predict and describe deficits, and toward considering their experiences as the primary unit of analysis. Research that considers elements of the student experience, such as prior life experiences, transition to college, engagement while in college, and the challenges and barriers to motivation, will more accurately reflect the challenges and opportunities students experience because such consideration will minimize potentially overlapping characteristics that are shared between undergraduate students with traditional and nontraditional college experiences.

I used a case study using qualitative methods to examine their college experiences in a branch campus environment where nontraditional characteristics and experiences are more common. The data generated through use of qualitative methods within a case study framework revealed positive aspects of nontraditional life and college experiences, in contrast to previous research that focused primarily on students' deficits when



compared to traditional students. I designed this study to access a group of students who were typically absent in previous higher education research. Qualitative studies decrease the likelihood of marginalizing research participants, avoid assigning pre-existing constructs, and allow researchers to gain new insight (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). Qualitative studies also allow researchers to “become more aware of their own biases, assumptions, and privileges” (Pope et al., 2009, p. 644). Future studies should continue to examine college students within environments where their characteristics and experiences are the norm. Research designed to understand and foster success of marginalized college students should avoid comparisons to majority populations because this perpetuates perspectives that only highlight student deficiencies.

Future research should also consider how changing perspectives about traditionally marginalized students away from deficit and toward embraced perspectives might influence college personnel and their optimism and commitment to serving students. When college personnel only work to address student deficits, they may overemphasize remediation and accommodation and fail to provide opportunities to foster students’ college successes. This study showed that, although students with nontraditional experiences may face obstacles and challenges, they may also be highly engaged academically and socially, and thrive throughout their life and college experiences.

### *Summary*

This section considered the findings of this case study and recommended implications for practice for college personnel and higher education. Students with nontraditional experiences continue to emerge as a silent majority on most of today’s traditional college campuses; even on campuses where their background and characteristics are more common, students in this study continued to refer to themselves as nontraditional and compared their experiences to the privileged, traditional college experience. Supporting college students’ nontraditional experiences will require a

commitment by institutions and college personnel to respect students' nontraditional journeys and experiences, and provide programs and services that embrace college students' multiple and intersecting identities. Institutions that attract college students with nontraditional experiences must extend their provision of support into the campus environment, and provide transparent and accessible academic advisement, encourage full-time attendance, and facilitate on-campus social connections for students while recognizing that off-campus social connections may be equally beneficial. Finally, institutional commitment to supporting students with nontraditional experiences should extend to in-class experiences and pedagogy.

This case study using qualitative methods and future research with similar methods has expanded understanding about nontraditional college experiences and has begun to redefine students based on their own biographies. Students in this study provided detailed and inspiring stories that must inform institutional practices and policies designed to meet the unique and complex needs of a population of students with nontraditional experiences. The voices of college students with nontraditional experiences should be adequately represented in future research about higher education.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW SCRIPT

## Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This interview will gather descriptive data about your experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest. This one-hour interview consists of ten questions that will ask you to reflect, recall, and share your experiences while enrolled in college. At any time during the interview, you may feel free to ask to repeat the question or ask for clarification. On occasion, I may ask related follow up questions to the original scripted questions to gather more information from you about your reflections and recollections.

During the interview, I ask your permission to use a recording device. I will be the only person to use this recording for purposes of transcription and analysis of your answers to these interview questions. Please tell me if I may have your permission to record this interview. You may at anytime request to stop the interview or the tape recording.

Academic experiences include student patterns of enrollment, balancing life priorities, and activities related to taking college classes. The following open-ended research questions will aim to understand how students experience academics while enrolled in college.

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me about your life experiences since high school. What path did you follow before you came to WIU Quad Cities?  
(Delayed enrollment)
2. Do you attend college full-time or part-time? What factors played a part in your decision to attend full-time or part-time? (Mode of study)
3. Please tell me about your experiences with academics at WIU Quad Cities.  
(Academic integration)
4. What do you like about taking college courses? Please explain what you do not like about college courses. (Academic integration)
5. What do you know now about academics that you wish you had known prior to becoming a student? (Academic integration)
6. What else would you like me to know about your academic experiences at WIU Quad Cities?

Social experiences include student experiences that include interpersonal relationships with friends and family both on- and off-campus. Social experiences also include living circumstance, possible employment, and other situations that require personal interaction with others. The following open-ended research questions aim to understand how students experience social relationships and activities while enrolled in college.

7. Please describe a typical day when you are on campus, but not in class. How do you spend your time? How has that changed or stayed the same during your time as a student? (On-campus social activities)
8. Please describe a typical day when you are off campus. How do you spend your time? How has that changed or stayed the same during your time as a student? (Living off-campus, multiple life roles, employment)
9. What advice would you offer to a new student who has similar background and experiences as your own? (Multiple life roles)
10. What else should I know about your academic and social experiences that will help me understand your experiences as a student at Western Illinois University - Quad Cities? What advice would you give a new Western Illinois University - Quad Cities student?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and your contribution to my research study. To ensure that I have most accurately reflected your experience, I would like to invite you to provide any physical artifacts that describe your academic and social experiences in college. I would also like to invite you to participate in a follow-up interview to ensure that I have accurately reflected your responses.

### **Member Check Questions**

Sincerest thanks to you again for participating in this study and this follow up interview, and I really appreciate your time. This thirty-minute interview consists of four questions that will ask you to consider whether I have accurately reflected your reflections and responses from the first interview. You may also feel free, as appropriate, to add any additional thoughts or recent experiences. At any time during the interview, you may feel free to ask to repeat the question or ask for clarification. On occasion, I may ask related follow up questions to the original scripted questions to gather more

information from you about your reflections and recollections. You may ask to discontinue this second interview at any time.

1. Did you feel the transcripts you reviewed accurately reflected your responses to interview questions?
2. Does the analysis accurately reflect your experiences with academics? What else would you like to add, if anything?
3. Does the analysis accurately reflect your social experiences while in college? What else would you like to add, if anything?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share about your college experience?

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Project Title:** Undergraduate Student Academic and Social Experiences on a Branch Campus: A Case Study

**Principle Investigator:** Kristi S. Mindrup

**Research Team Contact:** Kristi S. Mindrup (563) 505-6288

I invite you to participate in a research study conducted by an investigator from Western Illinois University and The University of Iowa. The purpose of this research study is to examine undergraduate student experiences with academics and social activities while enrolled at a branch campus in the U.S. Midwest. I wish to understand more in depth the experiences of undergraduate students who attend a branch campus.

If you agree to participate in this study, your involvement will include a one-hour interview, and a maximum of five hours for an observation of your typical day. I will also contact you for a brief, 20-minute follow-up interview as I analyze data if I seek clarification on questions or issues you raised during your interview. This follow-up will occur 2-4 weeks following the interview.

If you agree to participate in this voluntary study, I will contact you to participate in an initial interview, and a follow-up interview. I will arrange a time convenient with your class, work, and personal schedule and I will send a reminder before a scheduled meeting.

After obtaining your consent to participate, the interview will include open-ended questions about your experiences with college related decisions, academics, and social activities. The interview will take place on campus, in an office or meeting room scheduled to accommodate the interview. This will conclude with an invitation to participate in a follow-up interview, and to provide physical artifacts that illustrate your experience.

You may choose to provide physical artifacts or items that represent your academic and social experiences. Inclusion of these items is voluntary, and I will only describe items as context in the study. To protect your confidentiality and privacy I will not duplicate images to protect the privacy of you or other individuals included in these items.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. You are free to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable to answer, or withdraw from the study at anytime if you feel uncomfortable.

I will make an audio recording of the interview session. I will use this audio recording to transcribe our conversation and analyze the data contained therein. The audiotape will be handled only by me, the primary researcher, and another researcher also approved by the Office of Sponsored Projects to assist with transcription of audio. Audio recordings will



be stored in a secure file cabinet when the transcription process is complete. I will not include identifying information such as name or department or college in the written transcript.

To help protect your confidentiality, I will not ask questions outside the realm of your academic and social experiences. I will not ask personal questions, nor will I ask you to reveal any information of a personal nature. I will omit your name and other identifying information from the interview transcript. If I write a report or article about this study or share the study data set with others, I will do so in a way that you cannot be directly identified. All interview notes, audiotapes, and transcripts will be handled only by the primary researcher and will be stored in a locked cabinet in Western Illinois University - Quad Cities, Room 264. Electronic files will be stored on a password-protected computer located at Western Illinois University - Quad Cities Room 264 or on my home computer and will not be available on a shared network drive. Identifying information in the written report will be omitted and returned to Western Illinois University - Quad Cities, Room 264. Your contact information used to schedule your interview and follow up will be shredded and destroyed.

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study now or at any time during the study, please e-mail me at [ks-mindrup@wiu.edu](mailto:ks-mindrup@wiu.edu) to decline participation or by telling me during or after the interview that you no longer wish to participate.

If you have questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact the Office of Sponsored Projects, 1 University Circle, Sherman Hall 320, Macomb, IL or (309) 298-1191.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this research study.

Participant's Printed Name	Signature	Date
Investigator's Printed Name	Signature	Date

APPENDIX C  
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

**What is your current age?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your sex?**

- Female
- Male

**What is your major?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Did your mother attend college?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Did your father attend college?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your year in school?**

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate student
- Other:

**How many credit hours have you taken?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your ethnicity?**

- Caucasian/White
- African-American/Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- Asian/Asian American
- Other (including biracial):

**Did you grow up in a... ?**

- Suburb
- Rural town
- Metropolitan area/major city

APPENDIX D  
DATA TABLES

Table D1. Data Sort 1

THEME	CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY
Question 1: Delayed enrollment	Attending college	Chronology, college classes, defining college experience, distractions, grades, internship requirement, paying for college, return to college, social experience, stopping out, time in college, transfer
	Choosing a major	Academic advisement, changing major, good fit
	High school	Alternative high school, GED
	Left college	Academic advisement, isolated from other people, parenting, talking with faculty, personal health
	Motivation to attend college	Academic advisement, application fee, better job, books, career advancement, child, close to finishing, committed to college, faculty influence, friends, fulfilling career, lack qualifications, past failure, pleasing parents, sense of responsibility
	Reflecting about career	Career goals, career path, challenges in the field, connection to job, dangling carrot, hated job, left job, relationship to son's needs, work environment, work hours, working and parenting, working while attending college
	Reflecting about children	Bringing child to work, connection to job, pregnancy, role modeling
	Reflecting about family	First in family to attend college, marriage, parents' expectations, parent involvement, priorities, spouse
	Volunteerism	

Table D1 (continued)

Question 2: Mode of study	Attending college	Distraction, focus, motivation
	Decided to go full-time	Academic advisement, new awareness, reasons for attending full-time, finishing faster, financial aid
	Employment while enrolled	
	Mode of study	Full-time, part-time, accelerated
	Motivation to attend college	
	Reflections about priorities	Feelings, grades, time management
Questions 3-5: Academic integration	Campus environment	Size, age
	Children	
	Considering the future	Graduate school, employment
	Employment	
	Feelings about classes	
	Major	Finishing faster, finishing, internship requirement
	Professors	Supportive, approachable, liked professor, what makes a good professor
	Reference to community college	Comparison, preparation, comparison
	Reflecting about being an older student	Communication with faculty, being older
	Taking classes	Assignments, interest, level of difficulty, math, course relevance, class sizes, applying learning, discussion, finishing, grades, group work, learning from others, length of classes, schedule
	Enjoys learning	
	Comparing students	
	Identifies as nontraditional	
	Motivation	

Table D1 (continued)

	Comparing students	Age, commitment, different nontraditional students, motivation
	Reflecting about other students	Different nontraditional students based on age, similar interests, priorities, motivation
	Comparison to traditional students	
	Perceptions about college students	
	Social life	
	Advice to others	
	Love for school	
	Not knowing	Available majors, writing, who to talk to, course content, course requirements, feelings
	Personal life	Relationship to education
	Reflecting about the campus	
	Reflecting on college experience	Activities, distractions, enjoyment, mentoring other students, student employment
	Required course materials	
	Sources of information and support	Other students, co-workers, faculty, family
	Succeed	
	Feeling informed	
	Group work	
Questions 7-8, 10: Social experiences	Before/between/after classes	Academic advisement, comparison to being a stay-at-home mom, computer lab, running errands, quiet time, study
	Campus activities	
	Changing campuses	
	Not in class, not on campus	
	On-campus employment	
	Relationship with child's father	

Table D1 (continued)

	Relationship with other students	Classes in common, e-mail, getting to know other students, group work, little interaction with others, lunch, socializing with others, on-campus, off-campus
	Comparing other students	Age
	Finishing college	
	Multiple demands	Child/employment/school, child/homework, child/social, employment/school, prioritizing,
	Off-campus life	Child, husband, home life
	Quality of life	Income potential
	Reference to family	Child, husband, influence on goals, influence on parenting, lack of family support, marriage, other families
	Support	Childcare, encouragement, comparison to other students
	Taking classes	Schedule
	Considering the future	Graduate school
	Different life paths	Children choosing college, real world experience, not attending college, wrong reasons for attending college, making mistakes, learn from experiences
	Personal experience	
	Previous experience	Never liked school before, feeling behind, difficulty making friends
	Professor	
	Reference to campus	Nontraditional campus, flexibly, professors, class size, focus on academics
	Internship requirement	
	Reflecting about employment	Other students with similar experiences, past employment



Table D1 (continued)

	Reflecting on college experience	Grades, expectations, meeting people
	Self reliance	
	Small class size	
	Student employment	
Question 9: Multiple life roles	Advice to other students	Academic advising, do what makes you happy, experience more important than grades, focus, go to college, have a plan, one bite at a time, prioritizing, research opportunities, support system, time management
	Personal experience	Academic advising, comparison to community college, decision to attend college, expectations of others to attend college, multiple demands, professors, quality of life, reflecting about family, reflecting on college experience, self-reliance, interaction with campus staff, support system, having a child

Table D2. Data Sort 2

THEME	CATEGORY
Advice to others	Taking classes, different life paths, do what makes you happy, experience more important than grades, focus, go to college, have a plan, prioritize, research opportunities, support, time management
Attending college	Activities, choosing a major, chronology, defining college experience, distraction, enjoyment, expectations, feelings, finishing college, grades, internship requirement, lack of awareness, mentoring others, full time vs. part-time, paying for college, reference to community college, schedule, social experiences, sources of information, sources of support, stopping out, succeeding, transferring
Campus environment	Activities, age, before/between/after classes, environment, location, nontraditional campus, not in class not on campus, size, employment, graduate school, lifelong learning, academic advisement, finishing faster, new awareness, reasons for full-time attendance
Considering the future	Employment, graduate school, lifelong learning
Decision to attend full-time	Academic advisement, financial aid, finishing faster, new awareness, reason to attend full-time
Employment	Challenges in the field, connection to job, dangling carrot, goals, lack qualifications, left job, on-campus job, past job, relationship to son's needs
Previous education	High school, community college
Motivation to attend college	Academic advising, application fee, books, career advancement, child, close to finishing, committed to college, expectation to attend college, fulfilling career, income potential, lack qualifications, parents' expectations, past failure, personal, professors, reference to friends, respect, seeking meaningful experiences, self-reliance, sense of responsibility
Multiple demands	Sense of responsibility, child/employment/school, child/school, employment/child, employment/school, priorities, school/social, support
Professors	Approachability, did not like professor, liked professor, supportive, what makes a good professor
Family Relationships	Child, child's father, family background, influence on goals, influence on parenting, lack of family support, parents, pregnancy, husband/boyfriend
Reference to other students	Age, comparing traditional/nontraditional, interaction with other students, motivation, priorities
Reference to self	Reflecting about being an older student, self-reliance

Table D2 (continued)

Taking classes	2-way audio video classes, applying learning, asking questions, assignments, choices, discussion, feelings about classes, grades, group work, interest, learning from others, level of difficulty, math, online classes, required course materials, schedule, size, studying, writing
Volunteerism	

Table D3. Final Data Sort

THEME	CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY
1) Student background and prior life experiences	Life experiences	High school, family, employment
	Community college experiences	Attendance, stopping-out
2) Student transition experiences	Discovering options	Choosing a major, new awareness, decision to attend full-time, paying for college
	Balancing multiple priorities	Employment, family responsibilities, distraction, support, prioritizing
3) Student engagement experiences	Campus environment	Nontraditional campus, campus characteristics, time on campus
	Social interaction	Interactions with peers, interactions with faculty, social activities
	Academic experiences	Course assignments, engaged learning, class format, feelings about classes
4) Student motivation	Extrinsic motivation	Career, other people, grades
	Intrinsic motivation	Self-reliance, personal enjoyment, finishing
	Advice to others	College advice, follow your dream

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