

THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS

50 YEARS OLD AND OLDER

THESIS

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by

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San Marcos, Texas  
December 2009

THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS  
50 YEARS OLD AND OLDER

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2009

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to members of my family. First of all, I am grateful to my husband Michael. He insisted I follow my dream to obtain my master's degree and supported me throughout the process. Family members kept me focused on my educational goal. Special recognition goes to my mother who showed me all things are possible by completing her GED in her 60s then graduating college at the age of 70, my daughter Patricia who found time to critique my papers while completing her college assignments, and my sister Chris who, while a single mother of a young child, received her Doctor of Optometry.

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Now, one journey has ended and another is about to begin. As stated in a Frank Sinatra song, "You can be better than you are. You could be swinging on a star."

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS**

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#### **SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: ROBERT F. REARDON**

There have been several reasons for older people attending colleges and universities including increased life expectancy, growth in the older student population, multiple careers, economics, and the changing dynamics within institutions. The research was conducted in a southwestern state university with over 29,000 students that offer almost 200 programs for bachelors, master's, and doctoral degrees. All undergraduates 50 and older were contacted and the response rate was 54.2%. This thesis combines a quantitative study with thematic Open-Ended Questions to identify why undergraduates who were 50 and older attend college. Several variables were analyzed including: student engagement, academic goal orientation, and educational reasons for attending college.

Additionally, the participants' race/ethnicity, gender, status, campus access, family academic history, and household income were analyzed. Reliability tests and t-tests were performed against the results gleaned from the test instruments. Responses from Open-Ended Questions provided themes which correlated to the quantitative responses. Finally, the findings identified positive and negative experiences for undergraduates 50 and older, along with their challenges, concerns, and recommendations regarding the university, personnel, courses, and mobility dilemmas. After analyzing all the data, the following recommendations were proposed: (1) improvement with the advisor and counseling process, (2) course offering adjustments and enhancements, (3) improvement in parking relating to mobility concerns, and (4) extension of office hours during the school week.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

There have been several reasons for older people attending colleges and universities. Some are increased life expectancy, growth in the older student population, multiple careers, and changes with the dynamics of the institutions (Kanter, 2006; Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). Due to the rapid changes in the workplace and increasing life span (Mott, 1999; Riley, 2005), a myriad of people may have or are preparing for multiple careers. One reason for these changes relates to the medical and scientific advances which aid in the extension of life. As a result, changes within the instructional institutions have and will probably continue to require modifications to adjust to this educational paradigm shift (French, & Bell, 1999b; Carnevale 2003; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).

People in the United States are living numerous years beyond the age of retirement; this can be substantiated visually by utilizing a highly-unusual and non-scientific approach. Walk through graveyards that have existed for a couple of centuries, at least since the 1800s, determine the average age for any given time-period, and calculate how long the majority of individuals lived during nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. When reviewing life expectancies (Riley, 2005), the

average age in 1850 was 35.1 years. By 1900, life expectancy increased to 45.1 years, and in 1950, the average was 58.4 years (Riley, 2005).

Current documentation exists relating to the average life expectancy in the United States. According to Mott (1999), the average life expectancy is 76.1 years; people are living longer, working longer, and continuing (when interested) in expanding their knowledge. Another report regarding this change in society was presented in a National Public Radio review on longevity (2007) which ranked states according to life expectancy. Hawaii was listed as number one among the states with 80 years as the average life span. Texas was ranked thirtieth with a life probability of 76.7 years. Last of the fifty states was Mississippi with 73.6 years. Finally, our capital, the District of Columbia, was ranked last with 72 years (Table 1).

Population has been represented numerous ways on the United States Census website (n.d.). For this paper, the census utilized was the comparison by age and gender from the 2000 census. The evaluation was further delineated into three age groups; the breakdown was 18-24 years, 25-49 years, and 50-70 years (Table 2). The population counts were adjusted and estimated for the year 2010 (Table 3). From 2000 through 2010, the population between the ages of 50 and 70 is estimated to increase to 75,908,996. This represents 36.1% of the people between the ages of 18 and 70. The computations for this age range (50-70) were much smaller in the 2000 census; the tally was 53,268,952 which represented 28.7% of the population of 18 through 70 years. The difference in the counts is an estimated increase of 22,640,044 for the 50 to 70 year olds by the year 2010. With this information, one may extrapolate that within the coming years, the numbers of students 50 and older should be increasing. Likewise, the percentages of traditional

students between the ages of 18-24 will be decreasing. In turn, this will change the dynamics of the academic institutions and their student requirements.

Table 1: Life Expectancy for the United States. This expectancy was listed alphabetically and retrieved from National Public Radio (Retrieved July 9, 2008 from <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/longevity/?sc=emaf>)

STATE	RANK	LIFE (years)	STATE	RANK	LIFE (years)
Alaska	26	77.1	Montana	25	77.2
Alabama	48	74.4	Nebraska	16	77.8
Arizona	22	77.5	Nevada	39	75.8
Arkansas	43	75.2	New Hampshire	6	78.3
California	10	78.2	New Jersey	23	77.5
Colorado	12	78.2	New Mexico	27	77.0
Connecticut	4	78.7	New York	18	77.7
Delaware	29	76.8	North Carolina	40	75.8
Florida	21	77.5	North Dakota	8	78.3
Georgia	41	75.3	Oklahoma	44	75.2
Hawaii	1	80.0	Ohio	36	76.2
Idaho	15	77.9	Oregon	17	77.8
Illinois	33	76.4	Pennsylvania	31	76.7
Indiana	37	76.1	Rhode Island	9	78.3
Iowa	7	78.3	South Carolina	45	74.8
Kansas	24	77.3	South Dakota	18	77.7
Kentucky	42	75.2	Tennessee	45	75.1
Louisiana	49	75.1	Texas	30	76.7
Maine	20	77.6	Utah	3	78.7
Maryland	35	76.3	Vermont	11	78.2
Massachusetts	5	78.4	Virginia	28	76.8
Minnesota	2	78.8	Washington	13	78.2
Michigan	34	76.3	West Virginia	46	75.1
Mississippi	50	73.6	Wisconsin	14	77.9
Missouri	38	75.9	Wyoming	32	76.7
District of Columbia	51	72.0			

Table 2: Census summations. Census summations from the 2000 United States Census. (Retrieved July 9, 2008 from <http://ceic.mt.gov/C2000/SF12000/Pyramid/pptab00.htm>)

2000 United States Census			
Population by Gender and Age			
Age	Male	Female	Both
18 to 24	13,873,829	13,269,625	27,143,454
25 to 49	52,457,833	52,674,822	105,132,655
50 to 70	25,497,959	27,770,993	53,268,952
Grand Total	91,829,621	93,715,440	185,545,061

Table 3: Census and percentages. Census and percentages for 2000 and an estimated census with percentages for 2010 from United States Census. (Retrieved July 9, 2008 from <http://ceic.mt.gov/C2000/SF12000/Pyramid/pptab00.htm>)

United States Census				
Population for 2000 and 2010 Estimate				
Age	2000	Percentage	Estimated 2010	Percentage
18 to 24	27,143,454	14.6%	28,974,622	13.8%
25 to 49	105,132,655	56.7%	105,401,939	50.1%
50 to 70	53,268,952	28.7%	75,908,996	36.1%
Grand Total	185,545,061	100.0%	210,285,557	100.0%

Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, and Turner (2007), while researching college students, noted that the adult learners in both two-year and four-year academic programs were considerably older than traditional students were. For institutions with student population under 500, 40.7 years was the average student age. Students attending institutions with student populations over 10,000, the age was 37.9 years. Due to the expected increase of people in the age groups referred to in the above paragraphs, the students' average age may increase over time. The influx of older adults entering or re-entering postsecondary institutions (including those 50 and older) in an academic learning environment has already been documented (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Trafford, 2004; Kanter, 2006).

As a correlation to the extension of the human life, many people are preparing for multiple careers. Kanter (2006) listed some of the reasons mature adults may be starting (or returning to) the academic environment. The explanations included, but were not limited to, completing one's education in a new field, starting a new career, preparing for the next stage of their life, and leadership assistance. Often, those students are returning to complete the education they started years earlier (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). In one article, Trafford (2004) reiterated information gleaned from the Department of Education

which stated full-time students over the age of 50 numbered almost 85,000 and part-time students were nearly 435,000. Using the percentage of 36.1% from Table 3 regarding the U.S. Census, the numbers of students 50 and older in 2010 may be close to 115,685 for full-time and 592,035 for part-time.

When becoming a successful adult student in college, those who are 50 and older may view learning preparation through different lenses than their younger counterparts. Byrd and Macdonald (2005) provided an understanding of college readiness from the perspectives of older college students. Results of this study indicate that life experiences (including work and family experience) as well as being older contribute to the development of skills seen as essential to college readiness. This has also become one of seven national education priorities (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in Byrd & Macdonald, 2005).

When changes occur to a postsecondary institution due to alterations with student populations (e.g. ages, physical challenges, course subjects, and/or technology), the institution, in order to stay viable and successful, should undergo enhancements and modifications to accommodate the iterative processes. For this to occur successfully, institutions must plan for adjustments to their organization in how they recruit, assist, and retain older students. This is where Organizational Development (OD) may positively assist the institution. While utilizing the most effective and useful OD interventions as identified by French and Bell (1999a), Carnevale (2003), and Holman, Devane, and Cady (2007), areas for improvement can be identified.

### Research Problem

A gap exists within the knowledge base about students 50 and older in postsecondary institutions. Additionally, there is an expected increase in the number of individuals from the older population that are planning to attend postsecondary institutions. One area of concern is recognizing how higher education will identify the requirements of these mature adults as they endeavor on the new journey of their life. These postsecondary institutions may need to develop processes to accommodate and keep these mature collegiate scholars within their educational walls. The differences and similarities between students within different age groups, specifically those 50 and older, should include their educational reasons, challenges, engagement, involvement, and perseverance with the educational institution.

### Purpose of the Study

A larger number of people 50 and older are attending college for the first time in their lives. These mature adults usually have completed raising children (if they had any) and may be looking towards their first retirement. Some articles have stated that people may have two or more careers over a life-time (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Kanter, 2006, Pusser, et al., 2007). For example, when researching Mississippi colleges and universities, Dunn (2002) compared several age groups: 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-49, 50-64, and age 65 and older. The report recommended that postsecondary institutions should respond to meet the requirements and fiscal demands of a skilled, well-trained, educated older workforce because the United States is changing from a youth based society to an age based culture. This response would correlate to some of the reasons older students attend postsecondary institutions.

With this initial background and knowledge, problems mentioned earlier become more relevant. They require clarification for nontraditional first generation students 50 and older attending postsecondary education institutions, including identifying how to prepare for the projected influx of these adults.

### Research Questions

With this review of research problem and background, three questions arise. What motivates undergraduate adults 50 and older to become college students? What are their perceptions, both positive and negative, regarding their experiences of the campus environment? What are the recommendations offered for improving the postsecondary institution for these nontraditional mature students?

### Definition of Terms

There are several terms that require clarification. They are nontraditional students, mature adults, first-generation students, continuous-generation students, and perseverance. For the purposes of this investigation, Choy (2002), Stokes (2006), Pusser et al. (2007) and the dictionary were used for the definitions listed below.

*Traditional students.* Students between the ages of 18 and 25 who are identified as those most likely to have followed an unbroken linear sequence from high school into a collegiate undergraduate program, attend college full-time, and do not work (Choy, 2002; Pusser, et al. 2007).

*Nontraditional students.* There are many variables identifying what characterizes a nontraditional student. For this investigation, undergraduate students who were 25 and older were asked to participate.

*Mature adults.* These students are 50 and older when they start or return to their academic endeavors and are a subset of all nontraditional students.

*First-generation.* First generation is a classification used to group and identify students in relation to family educational history. Those scholars who are the first in their family to attend a postsecondary institution are characterized as first-generation; their parents did not have a college degree.

*Continuous-generation.* For many students, their parents have attended and graduated from an academic postsecondary institution. The students within this criterion are considered continuous-generation students; their family understands the various distinguishing characteristics and challenges within the collegiate environment.

*Perseverance.* According to the dictionary, perseverance includes tenacity, persistence, and continuing to endure. Using this definition, this would represent students that continue in their endeavor to complete their academic education. The student's success occurs despite any obstacles encountered.

#### Researcher's Perspective

For the 34-plus years before becoming a master's student, I held several roles in various organizations, including senior-systems analyst, area-leader, and project-leader. Throughout this time, education for employees was stressed, and at one company, postsecondary degrees relating to one's profession were reimbursed. I have two family members who attended college as nontraditional students. My one sister, while divorced and raising a child on her own, attended college and graduated with a degree in optometry; she is now an adjunct professor in a mid-western university. In addition, my mother, in her mid-60s, received her GED, attended college, and just after she turned 70,

graduated with a minor in accounting and a bachelor's degree in theology. Finally, I also am in the age group being studied because after raising children, I am now working towards my master's degree. As a mature student in the master's program, I have an understanding of emotional and academic challenges associated in receiving a postsecondary diploma. In addition, because of my age and experiences, I have a better understanding and empathy for older, mature students.

#### Assumptions

Because all undergraduate students 50 and older were contacted, the main assumption being made is that the students who responded represented the population of non-respondents within this university. Currently, the findings are not generalizable to other universities within the United States, but may be after more research is conducted.

#### Delimitations

The delimitation is that the students in this study were from a single southwestern state university; they were undergraduates 50 and older.

#### Limitations

People who choose to respond may not be representative of the total population of mature, nontraditional, collegiate students. In addition, this study is not using a true mixed-methods approach; instead, Open-Ended Questions were used to amplify the quantitative information provided by the participants. Finally, the respondents do not represent other students attending different postsecondary institutions throughout the United States.

## Summary

By the age of 50, most adults have completed raising children (if they have them) and may be looking toward their first retirement. Since 1850, the average life expectancy has increased from 35.1 year (Riley, 2005) to 76.1 years (Mott, 1991). Times have changed and people in the United States now have longer life spans.

One of the outcomes is that older mature adults are returning to the academic classroom. They have provided several reasons including completing one's education in a new field, starting a new career, preparing for the next stage of their life, and leadership assistance (Kanter, 2006; Pusser, et al., 2007). Another reason was to complete the education students started years earlier (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). As a result, an outcome of the changing dynamics for older mature students may include the academic institutions undergoing enhancements to accommodate them through the effective use of Organizational Development (OD) interventions (French & Bell, 1999a; Carnevale, 2003; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).

To continue along this thought process, a literature review regarding enrollment, students' goals, challenges, perseverance, financial support, and organizational adjustments was conducted. The results are discussed at length in Chapter II. Methodology used and the findings will be reported in Chapter III and Chapter IV. This thesis will culminate with discussions, implications, and recommendations located in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Review of the Literature

A great deal research exists about nontraditional students persevering and graduating from postsecondary institutions. Perceptions of students have been documented; however, there seems to be a dearth of research specifically about nontraditional students who are 50 and older. This chapter will discuss existing literature in relationship to older adults within the academic environment and will review goals and barriers related to enrollment, students' goals, challenges, perseverance, financial support, and organizational adjustments. In addition, the chapter will identify gaps in the literature related to nontraditional students 50 and older.

#### *Enrollment*

Lord (2005), identified that nontraditional students make up 38% of postsecondary enrollment; this statistic was supplied by US Department of Education. Nontraditional enrollment is growing in postsecondary institutions. At Fayetteville State University, Bryan (2007) noted that for the year 2006, nearly 39% of their undergraduate population was nontraditional students. This was an increase since 2002 when only 36% of the undergraduate population was in this category.

According to Peter and Horn (2005), within the past 20 years women had enrolled in college at greater rates, been more persevering, and obtained college degrees faster than men obtained. Reviewing statistics from 1995-1996, Peter and Horn (2005) noted women were still more likely than men to complete and receive their degree were; this was usually accomplished this within five years. Women have surpassed their male peers in educational expectations, enrollment in postsecondary education, and college degree sought (Freeman, 2004). Gerald and Hussar (2003) predicted that by 2013 women would be approximately 57% of the student population. Interestingly, this also occurs in other countries. One example is Australia; Cobbin (2003) stated that female enrollments have continued to show a faster growth rate than men. Within a six year period (1987-1993) women in undergraduate courses increased their representation and involvement.

Jefferson Community College (Smydra & Kochenour, 1978) followed national trends in increasing adult enrollments. Specific characteristics analyzed by the study included age, gender, employment responsibilities, financial responsibilities, reasons for returning to school, sources of influence to return to school, obstacles encountered, perseverance, and performance factors in academic adjustment. These findings related to the experiences of older adults within the academic organization.

Maehl (2004) indicated that by the mid-1990s, almost 44% of the higher education students were nontraditional. All levels of college were affected; undergraduate, master, and doctoral students were working towards their degrees and academic dreams. The students included first-generation and multi-generation learners, some of which were in their mid-life and midcareer.

Stokes (2006) contended that nontraditional adult learners should now be considered the “traditional” student because they represented the majority of the students in higher education. According to the report, 58 % are 22 or older, 40% are 25 or older, 40% are part-time students, and 40% attend two-year colleges. Almost 8 million adults are currently enrolled in colleges and universities and the numbers were expected to grow.

*Students: Their Goals and College Readiness*

College readiness is one of seven national education priorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Access to college is challenging for nontraditional students because of issues related to academic, social, and economic readiness. Skills in time-management, the ability to apply oneself and focus on goals, and skills for advocating oneself as a learner are considered essential for college success.

In another viewpoint, Byrd and Macdonald (2005) provided an understanding of college responsiveness from the perspectives of older first-generation college students who transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions. The students’ life experiences contributed to their academic skills, time management, goal focus, and self-advocacy. Results of this study indicated that life experiences, including work and family experience, as well as being older, contributed to the development of essential skills towards college readiness and success.

Pusser et al. (2007) asserted that collegiate success of nontraditional adults is one of the keys to the United State’s future in growing global economy. They believed successful individual and social returns would be generated with academic achievement of these students. However, the researchers did identify two problems that could hinder

this achievement. First, the scholastic system is built for and still remains focused on the traditional student. Second, there is limited postsecondary success for first-generation college students.

The idea that higher educational institutions and employers might be able to help increase the rate of completion among nontraditional students was a premise promoted by Taniguchi (2005). Astone et al. (2000) stated that nontraditional college enrollment is characteristically an American way of attaining higher education. Those with high cognitive ability and high-status occupational backgrounds were significantly more likely to complete their degrees (Astone et al., 2000). One of the recommendations was that colleges could implement policies benefiting nontraditional students, thereby making their experiences more successful.

Community college students who were enrolled in degree producing programs of study became the focus of Johnson's research (1989). Subjects selected were male and female students aged 55 and above. Older students brought professional and practical expertise into the classroom environment after they acclimated to the academic requirements.

According to "*Chapter 12: Nontraditional Students*" (2001) from the University of North Carolina website, nontraditional students were back in school with clear goals and reasons for being involved in the academic environment. These scholars were usually thoughtful participants, could be a source of extra insights and information, and enjoyed teachers utilizing their particular type of diversity to the class's advantage.

Explanations supplied by Lieb (1991) for educational reasons included personal advancement (professional improvement), cognitive interest (seeking knowledge), and

social welfare (prepare for serving the community and/or mankind). Adult's motivation to learn was considered varied (Zemke & Zemke, 1984). The study included learning to cope with life-changing events, identifying learning opportunities to assist with these changes, willingness to engage in the learning experiences, and the improvement of the students' self-esteem. As a result, adults identified reason and application for their learning experiences.

According to Byrd and Macdonald (2005), the desire to improve career opportunities was the primary motivation for enrolling in college. Other responses included the aspiration to do better than their parents and transfer skills and abilities learned at work to academic learning challenges. For nontraditional adults, being older was perceived as a benefit to college preparation and contributed to their readiness for college. Participants illustrated that being older strengthened self-concept, self-advocacy, goal focus, and time-management skills.

An elevated degree of motivation along with a strong and positive reflection is required for nontraditional students returning to academia. When researching adults who have returned to college, Babineau and Packard (2006) discovered that some students who originally attended college directly from high school, then stopped and returned years later, were likely to have a positive identity. Other nontraditional students in this research were attending college for the first time to start a new career or to improve their current career.

### *Challenges*

Nontraditional students are challenged in many ways. Most studies reviewed by Sciba (n.d.) identified three main categories: academic, time management, and

psychological. Many nontraditional students enroll and persevere in an academic setting for several reasons. Two main reasons presented were aspirations to enhanced employment opportunities and/or the objective to prove to themselves, or others, that they were capable of completing their education. Of special note, women typically returned to school after a divorce or widowhood to change their career paths, or – according to Ford (1998) – to increase their own self-esteem.

In a study of women entering college at a nontraditional age, Pernot (1986) concluded that self-esteem does not appear to be an obstacle for older women students; they believed their life experiences gave them skills that made up for years away from a formal academic learning environment. Table 4 identifies the reasons students between the ages of 46-55 and those 56 and older returned to the academic environment as identified in Pernot's research. Of special note is that this research is over 20 years old and the reasons identified may have changed over time.

Table 4: Reasons for returning to college. These reasons were identified in Pernot's 1986 research.

Reason for returning to college	Percentages	
	Age: 46-55	Age 56+
Want a new career	31%	25%
More training for current job	4%	
Desired a promotion	12%	
Divorced, finances changed	12%	
Children grown and it's time do what I want	16%	25%
Other	25%	50%

Grottkau (1985) indicated that the number of nontraditional women entering postsecondary institutions was on the rise. Grottkau correlated this to the fact that the number of women entering the labor market had increased over time. However, when women entered the academic environment, there were numerous psychological variables

which required help from the support services of the academic institution they were attending. The study documented the result of group counseling interventions that worked with the student's self-concept, esteem, and anxiety. The assistance resulted in the women's commitment towards succeeding academically.

Researchers determined older scholars demonstrated a higher proportion of positive views when compared to their younger counterparts; this was especially prevalent when documenting attitudes about aging and gender among all-groups of college-based students (Laditka, Fischer, Laditka, & Segal, 2004). The older nontraditional learners had the most optimistic and multifaceted views towards aging.

#### *Perseverance*

Ryken (2006) maintained a complex set of factors impacted college attendance, persistence, and departure decision-making. The combination of creative solutions and adherence to rigid program parameters impacted students' career and educational trajectories through the application of information learned and applied by the students. School and job experiences were potential learning resources assisting students with clarifying educational needs and goals. These aspects helped students think critically about their work and educational choices. Progression between educational and career goals became visible to students and enabled parallel career planning.

After reviewing existing research, Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) deduced that interest and intrinsic motivation predicted positive affect for nontraditional scholars. The inference was that nontraditional students maintained a higher threshold of intrinsic motivation to learn with an accompanying increase in positive affect. Age contributed to the likelihood of a student being intrinsically motivated. The strongest predictor of

positive affect was interest, followed by intrinsic motivation. The theme of self-advocacy was congruent with ideas about the relationship between college student success and self-regulating behavior (Ley & Young, 2003).

In order to persist and succeed in the academic institutions, students must employ strong organizational skills. For self-regulated learning, Ley and Young (2003) identified and defined self regulation processes. They included self-evaluation, organizing and transforming, goal setting and planning, seeking information, keep records and monitoring, environmental structuring, self-consequences, rehearsing and memorization, seeking assistance from experts/teachers, seeking assistance from peers, reviewing tests, reviewing notes, and reviewing texts.

According to Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2007), one problem was that some of the students attending college were not fully prepared which negatively impacted their perseverance and degree completion when comparing this segment to traditional students. The most important finding from this study was that when various instructional formats were employed, instead of the traditional learning format, perseverance increased along with class ratings and test scores.

Colleges and universities sometimes ignore adult students and their potential for success (Ashburn, 2007). Postsecondary institutions should acknowledge the fact that any student, regardless of age, may end up leaving college and postponing or stopping their education and may return at a later date. When this occurs, age should not a factor in determining a potential student's perseverance.

Brown (2002) recommended seven guidelines to assist the nontraditional student with their development and perseverance. The recommended strategies include:

recognizing student uniqueness by developing an accepting cultural perspective and campus communities, establishing services to meet their various requirements, developing and enhancing student services to become sensitive to nontraditional educational backgrounds, employing professional staff with strong encouraging and counseling skills, developing workshops and courses to assist these students, designing experiences and opportunities related to the student's specific requirements, and encouraging faculty to develop and utilize inclusive educational methods. Brown recommended colleges and universities identify and incorporate retention processes to encourage and develop persistence, while at the same time establishing support structures and high-quality instruction to strengthen nontraditional student motivation and sustaining their commitment towards their higher educational goals.

#### *Financial Support*

Financial support is important for all students, including mature adults attending colleges and universities; this monetary assistance aids the students when attending college. Postsecondary education in the United States is funded better than most countries in the world (Wellman, 2006). However, there are concerns about college costs. Students who desire an education in a postsecondary school find the cost portion financially challenging, especially those who are low-income first-generation students. Another problem is that there are fewer grants for nontraditional students (College Scholarships, n.d.).

Other funding can and has been provided by states, counties, campus-based aids, Stafford loans, and scholarships (Student Aid, n.d.). In some states, students - who graduate high school there, entered the military first, and then attended college in the

same state - have received additional financial assistance; Texas and Illinois are two examples. Organizations have also provided additional funding to their employees. In 2004, American corporations spent more than \$51 billion dollars on training (Stokes, 2006), including, in some cases, support for academic degrees.

### *Organizational Adjustments*

Older mature students may have difficulties younger traditional students do not have, including mobility challenges, physical handicaps, and transportations concerns. To assist with these challenges, organizational adjustments may be necessary.

Organization development (OD) has been around since the 1950s (Marshak, 2006) and is used to understand social systems and the changes that ensue. Four strategic characteristics assist with the underlying philosophy of organization development. They are a humanistic philosophy, democratic principles, client-centered consulting, and an evolving social-ecological systems orientation. OD practitioners collaborate and/or partner with various organizations, including colleges and universities, to improve and develop their businesses. With postsecondary institutions, there is an iterative need to adjust and enhance their academic community with the influx of nontraditional students, as well as all scholars of various ages, races/ethnicities, gender, socio-cultural backgrounds, and disabilities.

Organizational changes have become paramount with the influx of mature adults 50 and older. Post secondary enhancements may be recommended after reviewing and analyzing research results. Organizational systems thinking about the structures, customs, and relationships within their business, including postsecondary institutions, may be difficult to understand because of their intricacies (Mayhew, 2006). A persuasive reason

for change is fundamental to the institution when determining how the future might impact them. As stated by Mahew (2006), organizational change occurs within a three-cycle pattern: reviewing the existing condition of the organization, planning for a transitional state where chaos may exist, and the future state that reflects what the organization will represent once the change is complete. While undergoing these processes, resistance must be anticipated and planned for by identifying possible conflicts and areas of tensions, and determining and executing appropriate actions to mitigate the opposition.

There are many OD interventions that may be used by an organization when considering the influx of nontraditional students, but are dependent upon the nature of the problem or change (French, & Bell, 1999b; Carnevale 2003; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007). Interventions according to the target groups of individual, dyads/triads, teams and groups, intergroup relations, and total organization are identified by French and Bell (1999b) and Carnevale (2003). A matrix was developed by Holman, Devane, and Cady (2007) when identifying more than 60 intervention methods which included adaptation for planning, structuring, and improving; planning ways to assist people with their future; structuring for relationship delineations or revamping work processes; improvement to augment and expand effectiveness; and supporting practices that supplement the other change methods.

There are four phases to be utilized in order to successfully implement a strategic modification where resistance is minimized and people support change within an organization (Maurer, 2006). First, there should be a convincing reason to embrace and activate the change process; this includes, depending upon the resistance, providing

information, responding to emotional reactions, and addressing areas of concern (e.g. distrust). For starting the process, the direction and/or vision, along with expectations must be presented. In addition, engaging people in the process, having leaders demonstrating their involvement, and building trust is a necessity. During the third phase, sustaining commitment may be challenging. This is where the strategies should be known by everyone, adequate resources are allocated, leaders stay actively involved throughout this integration phase, and senior leadership is continually demonstrated. Finally, if there are problems and confusion, the process must return to the planned change. Steps to assist may include focus groups, explanations of dilemmas, accepting feelings of anxiety related to the changes, and the leaders staying focused on the change while consistently maintaining trust.

### Summary

Plenty of research exists about nontraditional students persevering and graduating from postsecondary institutions. However, there is limited professionally approved research available about adults 50 and older attending colleges and universities.

The literature review encompassed a variety of subjects which included enrollment of nontraditional students, their goals and life experiences, challenges, perseverance, learning processes, educational funding, and organizational adjustments. As noted by several authors, the number of nontraditional students has been increasing in colleges and universities for a variety of reasons (Smydra, & Kochenour, 1978; Cobbin, 2003; Gerald & Hussar, 2003; Freeman, 2004; Maehl, 2004; Lord, 2005; Peter & Horn, 2005; Stokes, 2006; Bryan, 2007). The reasons were varied but the principal motivations disclosed, which could be correlated to current and future educational trends, were

professional advancement, expanding knowledge, a new career, and preparation for community service (Lieb, 1991).

According to Lord (2005), nontraditional students represent 38% of postsecondary enrollment. An example was Fayetteville State University where nearly 39% of the undergraduate population was nontraditional students (Bryan, 2007).

College readiness of nontraditional students correlated to one of the seven national educational priorities (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in Byrd & Macdonald, 2005). In conjunction with this, life experiences, including work and family experience, as well as being older, contribute to the development of essential skills towards college readiness and success (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005).

Though some older mature students had concerns, they demonstrated the ability to persist in their pursuit of an academic education; the strongest predictors were intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with age contributing to the intrinsic factor (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Perseverance worked in conjunction with academic achievement; researchers noted these students demonstrate positive views about themselves and their abilities (Laditka, Fischer, Laditka, & Segal, 2004).

Pusser, et al. (2007) found that the age of nontraditional students averaged between 37.9 years to 40.7 years. Collegiate success of nontraditional adults is one of the keys to the United State's future in the growing global economy. However, they also noted that two problems could hinder this achievement. These were; the collegiate system is built for and remains focused on the traditional student and there is limited postsecondary success for first-generation college students.

As a result, organizational changes have become necessary with the influx of mature adults 50 and older. Therefore, institutions must realize the structures, customs, and relationships may be difficult to understand because of their intricacies (Mayhew, 2006). Resistance should be anticipated and planned for by identifying possible conflicts and areas of tensions, then determining and executing appropriate actions to mitigate the opposition.

However, as noted above, there is a gap in the literature due to the limited information regarding research available regarding adults 50 and older attending postsecondary institutions. Clarification for nontraditional students 50 and older attending postsecondary education institutions, including identifying how to prepare for the projected influx of adults 50 and older, is necessary. This research investigated student attainment, academic goal orientation, educational reasons, and asked several Open-Ended Questions for clarification and thematic purposes. The research design, procedures followed, survey methodology, instruments used, data collection process, and data analysis will be described in next chapter.

## **CHAPTER III.**

### **METHODS**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to add to the knowledge base of students 50 and older by focusing on the students who were attending a southwestern state university. The research questions were: What motivates undergraduate adults 50 and older to become college students? What is their perception, both positive and negative, regarding their experiences of the campus environment? What are the recommendations offered for improving the postsecondary institution for these nontraditional mature students?

This chapter reviews the research design, procedures followed, survey methodology, instruments used, data collection process, and data analysis. The quantitative responses from the survey and themes produced from the Open-Ended Questions would benefit the university by identifying potential areas to increase and retain an anticipated influx of older scholars. A potential benefit is that this southwestern state university would have a more diversified student body where students of all ages, along with instructors, expand their knowledge and understanding of a variety of viewpoints.

## Research Design

An online survey was used to investigate and analyze student attainment and academic goal orientation (Appendix A; Appendix B). The quantitative portion of the survey gathered data which included levels of academic challenge, supportive aspects of the campus environment, comparisons in goal orientation, and an overall synopsis about older students' perceptions regarding this university. Educational reasons were expanded for additional information by the respondents. Amplification of the quantitative information provided by the participants was done by exploring the themes within the responses to the Open-Ended Questions relating to mature adult challenges, collegiate assistance, and future plans (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002; Creswell, 2003). The results were interpreted to assist in supplying answers regarding the reasons why mature undergraduate adults, 50 and older, enroll and persevere within this southwestern state university. The students' perceptions, both positive and negative, regarding their experiences of the campus environment were also analyzed.

## Research Procedures

Quantitative data were obtained two ways: through the registrar and through survey results. The registrar provided actual student counts by gender and degree attainment (e.g. bachelors); this information was also provided by the students who chose to participate. Respondents identified their race/ethnicity, gender, status, campus access, academic family history, reasons for education, and household income (Appendix A, p. 66). Responses to the Open-Ended Questions were used to identify themes and enhance the quantitative results (Appendix A, p. 65). The information from the registrar, along with the survey results, were reviewed and analyzed.

## Survey Methodology

Within this southwestern state university, the participant numbers were anticipated to be small compared to the overall collegiate population. This university boasts of over 29,000 students and offers almost 200 programs for bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. The student body is diverse with more than 32% of the students being considered racial-ethnic minorities.

Based on data supplied by the registrar's office, for the fall semester of 2009, the population count of students 50 and older was 420 where 168 students were working towards their undergraduate degree and 252 students were in graduate programs. Students that fit the age criteria were contacted when requesting their participation. The response rate of the undergraduate students 50 and older was 54.2%; 91 of the 168 eligible students completed the survey.

Even though the emphasis and research was about nontraditional undergraduate students who were 50 and older, there were some comparisons with nontraditional undergraduate students who were between the ages of 25 and 49. The number of potential participants was provided by the Systems Support Analyst at the Registrar's office. For undergraduates between the ages of 25-49, the number was 4423. Students completing the survey numbered 1,206, which converted to a response rate of 27.3%.

The participants were identified by the Registrar. For this thesis, the nontraditional undergraduate mature scholars were 50 years or older when attending this southwestern state university. The selection process included students who were born on or before December 31, 1958. Students 25-49 within the same southwestern state institution were included for comparison between two different age groups. Birth date

considerations were applied. For the undergraduate population, the date selection was for students with a birth-date on or before December 31, 1983; these students were at least 25 years old. The Institutional Research Office (IRO) used students' birthdates and degree sought when sending the survey requests to potential participants.

### Ethics

Prior to conducting the survey, IRB approval was applied for and received. The federal and institution requirements were met and the approval number assigned by this southwestern state university was 2009Y6157.

A recruitment message was sent to all eligible undergraduates through e-mail which included information about the research, an imbedded consent form, and a link to the online survey (Appendix C; Appendix D). This e-mail was sent out by the thesis advisor and the researcher never saw the names or any form of student identification in the survey. The e-mail explained that the research was for a thesis (Appendix C). The consent form (Appendix D) was imbedded in the e-mail which included the sentence: "Taking the survey indicates that you have read the description of the study and agree to participate." The potential participants were also told that their participation was voluntary, they could opt out at any time, and their confidentiality was preserved.

Confidentiality was protected by using procedures to ensure students' identification was maintained; this included not accessing or storing personal information. Only the responses to the survey (Appendix A; Appendix B) were analyzed.

### Instruments

In order to aid this investigation, two instruments, along with open-ended thematic questions, were used (Appendix A; Appendix B). The instruments were (1) sub-

sections from the Student Attainment Survey (NSSE, 2008) and (2) the Academic Goal Orientation Survey (VandeWalle, 1997).

The Student Attainment Survey (Appendix A, p. 62-65) contained subscales from the National Survey of Student Engagement Test Instrument (NSSE, 2008) regarding students' Academic Challenges, Supportive Campus Environment, Relationship Perceptions, and an Overall Evaluation Synopsis about this university. Depending upon the section, the participants grade themselves on a 4 or 7 point Likert-type scale. The Supportive Campus Environment, Academic and Personal Growth, and Academic Challenge sections used the 4 point rating where the participant selected from *very much* (1) to *very little* (4). Relationship Perceptions used a 7 point rating scale which started with a negative assessment (1) and ended with a positive assessment (7) of students, faculty, and administrative personnel. The Evaluation Synopsis used the 4 point scale which ranged from *excellent* (1) to *poor* (4).

Types of goal orientation (Appendix B) were identified with the use of the Academic Goal Orientation Index (VandeWalle, 1997) which was designed as a work-domain goal-orientation test instrument. The questions referred to learning, courses, and achievements. The survey-participants selected their responses from a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (7). The scales were used to identify Learning Goal Orientation, Proving Goal Orientation, and Avoiding Goal Orientation (VandeWalle, 1997). Learning Goal Orientation measured the student's desire to develop themselves through various learning processes. Those students who wanted to gain approval from others by demonstrating their competence replied positively to the items in the Proving Goal Orientation group. Finally, students who tried to avoid negative

appraisals which demonstrated ineptitude selected characteristics found in Avoiding Goal Orientation.

For illustration and expansion purposes, the survey also had a thematic section. This consisted of an expansion for educational reasons (Appendix A, p. 66). Open-Ended Questions regarding the participants' institutional recommendations, personal challenges, institutional assistance, reasons for the degree sought, and degree usage were included (Appendix A, p. 65).

### Data Collection

The research data was collected by information provided by the Registrar and results from the surveys (Appendix A and B). Existing and validated test instruments were utilized in the data collection process.

Once permission was obtained from the IRB, the Registrar provided numerical information regarding potential participants' gender and degree sought (e.g. bachelors). The data was collected through a survey website and downloaded into an SPSS version 16 data set for analysis. The data were stored on the College of Education (COE) computer that houses MR Interview and transferred to my PC which did not have identifying information about the respondents. The data was password protected. Only, the chair and I had access to this information. After the transfer, the data on the COE server were deleted.

### Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was used to answer the research questions and was both descriptive and inferential. Examples of descriptive statistics generated means (averages) and standard deviations for age ranges, race/ethnicity, gender, status, campus access,

academic family history, reasons for education, and household income (Appendix A, p. 66). There was also a comparison between the number of potential participants and actual responses supplied. Although these instruments have demonstrated validity and reliability, the reliability of the instruments was calculated for this population. Because of the highly diverse nature of these non-traditional students, we expected slightly lower reliabilities than had been seen in previous work.

Inferential statistics were applied in the exploration of differences regarding the responses between those who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49 for student attainment and academic work orientation (Appendix A, p. 62-65; Appendix B); this was done with a t-test which had the confidence level set at 0.05.

Expansion of educational reasons was analyzed (Appendix A; p. 66). Themes were explored and documented from the Open-Ended Questions (Appendix A, p. 65). By highlighting the current scholars' concerns and requirements, the results aided in the identification and necessary preparation for the presumed influx of older students; a potential benefit for this southwestern state university.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Processes Utilized**

Survey participation was requested shortly after the fall semester commenced. The participants were given ten school days to complete the survey. Two reminders were sent to non-respondents to achieve the maximum participation possible. After the collection of survey results, the analysis was divided into four main sections: (a) demographic analysis, (b) Student Attainment, (c) Academic Goal Orientation, and (d) themes identified from Educational Reasons and Open-Ended Questions (Appendix A; Appendix B).

Quantitative comparisons between undergraduates 50 and above versus undergraduates 25-49 were performed against the demographic responses (Appendix A, p. 66). For the quantitative portion of the analysis from sub-sections of the Student Attainment Survey (NSSE, 2008) and the Academic Goal Orientation Survey (VandeWalle, 1997), two tests were performed: the reliability test was used to validate results and the t-test was used to identify possible statistically significant differences between the undergraduate respondents 50 and older and those between 25 and 49 years of age. Responses to the Educational Reasons and Open-Ended Questions from the undergraduates 50 and above were reviewed and themes were identified (Appendix A, p. 65-66).

## Analysis of Results

For the first part of the data analysis, personal variables related to the participants' race/ethnicity, gender, status, campus access, family academic history, and household income were reviewed and descriptive statistics were prepared. Reliability tests, using Chronbach's alpha, were performed for Student Attainment Survey (NSSE, 2008) and the Academic Goal Orientation Survey (VandeWalle, 1997). T-tests were performed to identify possible statistical significant differences in the means of the two age groups of the scores for both instruments. In most cases, Levine's test revealed a difference in the variance of these groups and reduced the number of degrees of freedom that could be claimed in the statistical analysis. Finally, themes were identified when reviewing responses to the Educational Reasons and Open-Ended Questions.

### *Responses Rates*

For the fall semester of 2009, the population count of students 50 and older that were working towards their undergraduate degree was 168. All students that fit the age criteria were contacted when requesting their participation. The response rate of the undergraduate students 50 and older was 54.2%; 91 of the 168 participants completed the survey (Table 5). Additionally, comparisons with nontraditional undergraduate students who were between 25 and 49 years of age were conducted. For undergraduates between the ages of 25-49, the number of potential participants was 4423. There were 1206 valid responses which correlated to a response rate of 27.3%. Overall, 1,297 undergraduate students starting at the age of 25 successfully completed the survey, of which 91 participants were 50 and older. A caveat must be added when calculating percentages for individual variables because the number of respondents changed depending upon the

classification and open-ended question sections. Even though there were fewer potential participants, the response rate of the undergraduates 50 and older was much higher than the response rate of undergraduates between the ages of 25-49.

Table 5: Undergraduate survey response breakdown.

	Undergraduate Survey Responses					
	50+		25-49		Total	
Complete	91	54.2%	1,206	27.3%	1,297	28.3%
Non-Respondents	77	45.8%	3,217	72.7%	3,294	71.7%
Totals	168	100.0%	4,423	100.0%	4,591	100.0%

#### *Race, Gender, Status, Access, Academic History and Income*

When reviewing the race classification for the entire pool of undergraduate respondents without breaking the results down into the two age classifications: 68.9% were White, 17.3% were Latino, 4.9% were Black, 4.4% were Asian, 3.7% identified themselves as being bi- or multi-racial, and 0.8% was Native American. However, the breakdown between the age groups shows a different story (Table 6). The higher proportion of racial and ethnic minorities among younger adult students (32.7%) may represent a trend that is happening across the country. This is to be expected because the ethnic mix within the United States and within universities has been expanding over time.

Table 6: Undergraduate ethnicity breakdown. This is for undergraduates with comparisons between those who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

Ethnicity	Undergraduate Ethnicity Breakdown					
	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
White	99	76.7%	405	67.3%	504	68.9%
Latino	15	11.6%	111	18.4%	126	17.3%
Black	6	4.7%	30	5.0%	36	4.9%
Asian	3	2.3%	29	4.8%	32	4.4%
Bi-/Multi-Racial	5	3.9%	22	3.7%	27	3.7%
Native American	1	0.8%	5	0.8%	6	0.8%
Total	129	100.0%	602	100.0%	731	100.0%

Overall, 40.8% of the undergraduate respondents were male and 59.2 % were female. By age grouping, for those 50 and older, the male to female percentage was 28.9% to 71.1%. When comparing the male to female ratio of 25-49 year olds, the percentage was 41.7% to 58.3% (Table 7). In all three comparisons, the number of female undergraduate participants is greater than the number of male undergraduate participants. An interesting finding is that 71.1% of undergraduate students who are 50 and older were female.

Table 7: Undergraduate gender breakdown. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

Undergraduate Gender Breakdown						
Gender	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Male	26	28.9%	499	41.7%	525	40.8%
Female	64	71.1%	697	58.3%	761	59.2%
Total	90	100.0%	1,196	100.0%	1,286	100.0%

Full-time students were identified as those taking at least three courses a semester. Using this criterion, 80.4% were full-time students and 19.6% were part-time students. By age grouping, for those 50 and older the full-time to part-time percentage was 60.0% to 40.0%. When comparing the full-time to part-time ratio of 25-49 year olds, the percentage was 82.0% to 18.0% (Table 8). In all three comparisons, the number of full-time undergraduate respondents was greater than the number of part-time undergraduate respondents. However, there is an unknown with this grouping. We do not know the breakdown of how many were taking three, four, or more courses. We also do not know the percentage of full-time students only taking classes in the evening. Another interesting statistic is that 82% of undergraduates between the ages of 25-49 were full-time students.

Table 8: Undergraduate student status breakdown. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

Undergraduate Student Status						
	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
Full-Time versus Part-Time	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Full-Time	54	60.0%	986	82.0%	1040	80.4%
Part-Time	36	40.0%	217	18.0%	253	19.6%
Total	90	100.0%	1,203	100.0%	1,293	100.0%

When identifying the percentages of adults commuting or living on campus, the ratio was 97.3% to 2.7%. By age grouping, for those 50 and older the commuters to living-on-campus percentage were 95.5% to 4.5%. When comparing commuters to living-on-campus percentage of 25-49 year olds, the percentage was 97.4% to 2.6% (Table 9). Of special note is that 4.5% of undergraduates 50 and older live on campus.

Table 9: Undergraduate student commute status. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

Undergraduate Student Commute Status						
	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
Commuting versus living on campus	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Commute	84	95.5%	1,162	97.4%	1,246	97.3%
Live on Campus	4	4.5%	31	2.6%	35	2.7%
Total	88	100.0%	1,193	100.0%	1,281	100.0%

Academic family history comparing students with family members having a collegiate background to those who were the first in their family to attend college was the next variable analyzed. For this study, 63.8% were multi-generational students and 36.2% were first generational students. Similar percentages existed within the age groupings. For those 50 and older the response percentage of multi-generation to first-generation

was 64.9% to 35.1%. When comparing multi-generation students to first-generation students of 25-49 year olds, the percentage was 63.8% to 36.2% (Table 10).

Table 10: First Generation versus Multi-Generation. Undergraduate student academic generational breakdown for undergraduates with comparisons between those who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

First Generation versus Multi-Generation Students						
First Generation versus Multi-Generation	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
First-Generation	33	35.1%	451	36.3%	484	36.2%
Multi-Generation	61	64.9%	791	63.7%	852	63.8%
Total	94	100.0%	1,242	100.0%	1,336	100.0%

The final descriptive variable analyzed was the household income for these undergraduates. The overall percentage of the undergraduates who claimed an income under \$30,000 was 51.4% (over half of the respondents), the percentage of the adult students who had a household income from \$30,000 to \$50,000 was 24.3%, and the remainder who claimed an income over \$50,000 was 24.3%. When breaking this down by the age groups, the resulting percentage for students 50 and older was 31.5% with an income under \$30,000, 24.7% claimed an income between \$30,000 and \$50,000, and 43.8% reported having a household income over \$50,000. The percentages for students 25-49 years of age was 52.9% with an income under \$30,000, 24.2% with an income between \$30,000 and \$50,000, and 22.9% reported having a household income over \$50,000 (Table 11). Of special note, even though over 40% of the respondents 50 and older claimed an income over \$50,000, on the opposite spectrum almost a third of the respondents 50 and older claimed an income under \$30,000.

Table 11: Undergraduate household income. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

Household Income	Undergraduate Household Income					
	50 and older		25-49		All Undergraduates	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Less than \$30,000	28	31.5%	630	52.9%	658	51.4%
\$30,000 - \$50,000	22	24.7%	289	24.2%	311	24.3%
Greater than \$50,000	39	43.8%	273	22.9%	312	24.3%
Total	89	100.0%	1,192	100.0%	1,281	100.0%

### *Student Attainment*

Although previous research has cited the reliability of the Student Engagement instrument (NSSE, 2008), the interitem reliability was checked for the data coming from this research. In general, researchers look for Cronbach's alphas between 0.70 and 0.95. Student Attainment from the NSSE (2008) was divided into several sub-sections: Supportive Campus Environment, Level of Academic Challenge, Academic and Personal Growth, Non-Academic Activities, Enriching Educational Experiences, Relationship Perceptions, and Evaluation Synopsis (Appendix A, p. 62-65). Table 12 reports the reliability for each sub-section within Student Attainment. The reliability of the constructs range from marginal to very good and supports the findings in the statistical analysis. The values in the 0.6 range are not surprising and are acceptable due to the diversity of the students. Prior applications of this instrument were with a more homogeneous population and yielded higher alphas.

Table 12: Reliability results for Student Attainment.

Reliability for Student Attainment		
Section	Number of Items	Chronbach's Alpha
Supportive Campus Environment	7	0.794
Level of Academic Challenge	5	0.802
Academic and Personal Growth	16	0.928
Non-Academic Activities	6	0.698
Enriching Educational Experiences	8	0.638
Relationship Perceptions	3	0.681
Evaluation Synopsis	2	0.647

To identify statistically significant differences for Student Attainment (Appendix A, p. 62-65), the level of confidence was set at 0.05. With the t-test, a negative number meant there was less satisfaction related to the relationship for the older adult respondents in comparison with the undergraduates between the ages of 24-49. When reviewing the results between the undergraduates that were 50 and older with students who were between the ages of 25-49 (Table 13), statistically significant differences existed in the areas of Non-Academic Activities and Relationship Perceptions. The positive t-test for undergraduates 50 and older with Non-Academic Activities may be related to a more rounded background with the arts, physical activities, spirituality, and the acceptance of various viewpoints. The respondents were less satisfied with the Relationship Perceptions because of negative experiences with faculty, administration, and other students; they provided additional explanations with the Open-Ended Questions. No statistically significant difference was seen for Supportive Campus Environment, Level of Academic Challenge, Academic and Personal Growth, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Evaluation Synopsis.

Table 13: T-test results for Student Attainment. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

T-test Results Student Attainment				
Section	t-test	df	sig	Statistically Significant Difference
Supportive Campus Environment	-0.04	100	0.97	No
Level of Academic Challenge	0.28	100	0.78	No
Academic and Personal Growth	0.12	100	0.91	No
Non-Academic Activities	2.21	103	0.03	Yes
Enriching Educational Experiences	-1.07	100	0.29	No
Relationship Perceptions	-2.25	102	0.03	Yes
Evaluation Synopsis	0.59	103	0.56	No
Attend same institution if starting over	-0.22	101	0.82	No

### *Academic Goal Orientation*

Academic Goal Orientation from VandeWalle (1997) was divided into three sub-sections: Learning Goal Orientation, Proving Goal Orientation, and Avoiding Goal Orientation (Appendix B). Learning Goal Orientation measured the student's desire to develop themselves through various learning processes. Those students who wanted to gain approval from others by demonstrating their competence replied positively to the items in the Proving Goal Orientation group. Finally, students who tried to avoid negative appraisals which demonstrated ineptitude selected characteristics found in Avoiding Goal Orientation. Although previous research has cited the reliability of this instrument, the Cronbach's alpha was checked for the data coming from this research. In general, researchers look for alphas between 0.70 and 0.95. Table 14 reports the reliability for each sub-section within Academic Goal Orientation. The reliability of the constructs was very good and supported the findings in the statistical analysis.

Table 14: Reliability results for Academic Goal Orientation.

Reliability for Academic Goal Orientation		
Section	Number of Items	Chronbach's Alpha
Learning Goal Orientation	4	0.856
Proving Goal Orientation	4	0.825
Avoiding Goal Orientation	5	0.820

To identify statistically significant differences for Academic Goal Orientation (Appendix B), the level of confidence was set at 0.05. With the t-test (Table 15), a negative number meant there was less satisfaction related to the relationship for the older participants relative to their younger colleagues. When reviewing the results between the undergraduates that were 50 and older with students who were between the ages of 25-49, statistically significant differences and a negative relationship existed in the areas of Proving Goal Orientation and Avoiding Goal Orientation. This would seem logical because of their age, real-life experiences, and expectations with themselves. These students are serious, focused, and demonstrate high educational goals. Their emphasis is on learning, not proving or avoiding.

Table 15: T-test results for Academic Goal Orientation. This includes comparisons between undergraduates who were 50 and older and those who were 25-49.

T-test Results for Academic Goal Orientation				
Section	t-test	df	sig	Statistically Significant Difference
Learning Goal Orientation	0.59	104	0.56	No
Proving Goal Orientation	-2.06	101	0.04	Yes
Avoiding Goal Orientations	-2.45	103	0.02	Yes

### *Thematic Analysis*

After analyzing the personal variables of the undergraduates 50 and older (Appendix A, p. 66), the quantitative portion of the survey (Appendix A, p. 62-65); Appendix B), and discussing significantly statistical differences within the Student Attainment Survey (NSSE, 2008) and the Academic Goal Orientation Survey (VandeWalle, 1997) test instruments, the focus shifted to the expansion of Educational Reasons and thematic review of the Open-Ended Questions (Appendix A, p. 65-66). The participants could choose not to answer the Educational Reasons or any section of the Open-Ended Questions which resulted with the number of responses being less than the number of participants. However, information was gleaned by those who contributed regarding the questions posed whereby many of the themes identified were also noted by Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002). The first area related to the Educational Reasons for the students working towards their degree (Appendix A, p. 66). The next section consisted of six free-form questions where the participants were given an opportunity to answer and expound upon the areas they deemed important including institutional changes, personal challenges, and institutional assistance (Appendix A, p. 65).

### *Educational Reasons.*

Prior research cites several reasons that a student may be involved with their academic education (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Kanter, 2006). These include new career, self improvement, professional advancement, social motivation, and children grown. The participants were requested to select which of these reasons best represented their motivation (Table 16). For this thesis, a decision was made that other reasons or a combination of the above selections might also be applicable. Therefore, a supplementary

section titled “Other” was provided (Appendix A, p. 66). The respondents conveyed additional insight regarding their academic educational pursuit including fulfilling lifelong dreams, a passion for learning, finishing the education started years earlier, becoming a role-model for their family, and a combination of the original reasons listed.

Table 16: Reasons for Education for Participants 50 and older.

Reasons for Academic Educational Pursuit		
Reason	Number	Percentage
New Career	26	38.8%
Self Improvement	15	22.4%
Professional Advancement	12	17.9%
Other	8	11.9%
Social Motivation	3	4.5%
Children Grown	3	4.5%
Total Responses	67	100.0%

### *Open-Ended Questions*

This section consisted of six free-form questions where the participants were given an opportunity to answer and expound upon the areas they deemed important. The major categories for these questions were Reasons for Degree Attainment, Planned Degree, Usage, Personal Challenges, Institutional Assistance, and Institutional Recommendations. The final question gave the respondents the ability to provide any additional information they seemed pertinent. Many of the themes which emerged from this analysis were documented by Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002).

*Reasons for degree attainment.* There were many reasons given for the pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, most of which are well-known and documented. These included better job, career advancement, social motivation, and improved employment opportunities (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Kanter, 2006). Additional reasons provided were

passion for learning, fulfilling a lifelong dream, personal satisfaction, and being a family role model. One participant stated, “I am pursuing a . . . degree because I am at an age where I want a career based on what I want to do for the next stage of my life.”

*Planned degree usage.* Common themes were evident on how the degree was to be used. Responses included applying the knowledge at work, promotional opportunities, financial improvement, helping others/community, and being used as a stepping stone for further education (e.g. masters, medical school, law school, doctoral degree). Citing another reason, one participant wrote, “This degree is proof to skeptics that my qualifications are equivalent to others who have a Bachelor’s degree.”

*Personal challenges.* The challenges faced by undergraduates 50 and older were numerous and in multiple examples correlated to the answers provided by the first question regarding recommendations. Parking, reliable transportation, limited selection of classes and times available, staff inaccessible at night, mobility challenges, and attitudes/knowledge of the staff were reiterated. Cases exist where this southwestern state university is losing income because courses have been limited to when (and how often) they are available. As one student wrote, “I am taking 6 to 9 hours a semester at [a local community college] because MY university has no offerings.” This correlates to the loss of financial income for this southwestern state university.

Additional concerns include registration problems with limited class size, the feeling of isolation, mandatory group projects (especially when commuting long distances from out of town), inflexibility of a few professors, instructors who consistently changed schedules and requirements mid-semester, and the additional bureaucracy with the university (e.g. Disability Office, Veterans Office).

Finally, adult students want to see recognition by the university that nontraditional students have additional responsibilities than the younger traditional students living on campus. As stated by one student: “Few professors [and faculty] seem to understand that we have entirely different issues (marriages, home ownership, kids, etc) than the young students have.”

*Institutional assistance.* Several suggestions were offered for how faculty, staff, and other students may or may not have helped the adult students in realizing their academic goals. Encouraging words correlated with creating a positive learning environment. Along with this were helpful and knowledgeable faculty and staff. An affirmative comment was, “... faculty ... have ... been very motivating and encouraging.” However, on the opposite spectrum, a respondent wrote, “... administration ... is not supportive enough to the needs of nontraditional students.” A concern, which was reiterated in previous free-form sections, was the inaccessibility of faculty and staff in the evening.

Again, the availability of courses during different times was an area of anxiety. One student stated, “I have to just wait and see if I can get into my degree-planned classes. If I can’t ... I can’t graduate until 1 year later.” Cost of books was another area where assistance is helpful. As one participant said, “Some professors realize that book cost are ridiculous and try to keep cost down plus making sure that all books required for a course are actually used and can be sold back.” Finally, on a positive note about other classmates, one respondent wrote, “The students are incredible. They are smart and helpful. They teach me things that some professors fail to get across.”

*Institutional recommendations.* Numerous recommendations regarding how the institution could change for the benefit of the undergraduate students were provided. First, because the students were older and mobility problems exist, parking closer to the classrooms, easier ability to receive handicap parking stickers, and additional handicap spaces was suggested. Along with these proposals was the improvement of existing campus transportation and parking lots (e.g. multi-level parking garage on campus by the classrooms).

The development of knowledgeable and helpful counselors and advisors which stay current, along with periodic mentoring sessions, is another significant area of concern. Because the majority of these students do not live on campus, having a group of experienced older students to guide and mentor new students and transfers would be welcome.

The timing of classes was another major area of concern, especially mandatory ones. Two suggestions provided were more sections of the same course in different formats (e.g. online, hybrid, webcam) and rotate when the classes are held (e.g. morning, afternoon, evening, and weekends for different semesters). Reduced or waived fees for students who are 55 and older was another recommendation; as noted in Table 11, over 31% of the students 50 and older claimed a household income under \$30,000. This procedure for reduced or waived fees already exists in many universities within the United States.

Improved/consistent ADA practices (ex. Computer labs) were a concern for those who are considered handicapped. Finally, because of constricted time schedules, having counselors and other services available (e.g. financial aid, counseling) during the

evenings would be extremely appreciated; one possibility is extending the hours to 6:30 PM Monday through Thursday.

*Additional information.* The last set of responses allowed participants to provide additional information about their academic pursuits. One of the ideas presented was to never give up learning. As one respondent stated “Desire and hard work can make anything happen.” Another one said, “I think people should know that they can learn something new no matter what age they are if they have that deep desire to do so.” A third respondent wrote, “That it is able to be done, even at an advanced age, if you have the desire.” Finally, another comment was “You are never too old to return to school, Education should be ongoing throughout one’s life.”

Other respondents were striving to be inspirational and help others. One person wrote, “I would hope ... that I inspire others to constantly strive to do more.” Along this thought pattern, a respondent stated, “Let’s help as many as are interested to expand and become useful to society as a whole.”

A third theme that was evident related to the role and personal perceptions of the nontraditional student. A person wrote, “I think the campus should embrace its non traditional students and find ways to help them get ahead, find financial aid, good advising and recognition.” Another respondent stated, “Older students are generally much more serious than younger students.” The final statement provided was “[This university] has one track, and if that track suits you, you can do okay here.”

Finally, one of the most humorous comments was, “That anyone can pursue a degree and education can keep dementia at arm’s length.”

## Summary of Findings

For quantitative analysis, results from two test instruments were analyzed; these were sub-sections from the Student Attainment Survey (NSSE, 2008) and the Academic Goal Orientation Survey (VandeWalle, 1997). When comparing those 50 and older to students 25-49 within Student Attainment (Appendix A, p. 62-65), the reliability of the constructs range from marginal to very good and supported the findings in the statistical analysis (Table 12) Also, statistically significant differences only existed in the areas of Non-Academic Activities and Relationship Perceptions (Table 13), which correlated to comments provided in the Open-Ended Question section (Appendix A, p. 65). Within Academic Goal Orientation (Appendix B), the reliability of the constructs was very good and supported the findings in the statistical analysis (Table 14). Statistically significant differences along with a negative construct existed in the areas Proving Goal Orientation and Avoiding Goal Orientations (Table 15). These statistics correlated to comments provided in the Open-Ended Questions section; the adult students are attending this southwestern state university to learn.

The sections about reasons for an education contained a variety of information (Appendix A, p. 66). Educationally, besides the known reasons provided, other reasons included fulfilling lifelong dreams, a passion for learning, finishing the education started years earlier, becoming a role-model for their family, and a combination of the reasons originally listed.

The free-form Open Ended Questions identified major themes and areas of concern. For students 50 and older, mobility and parking are challenges. The class schedule and format types are limiting for nontraditional students. Numerous students

feel as if they are treated as outcasts because the university emphasis regarding the availability of services and staff is for traditional students living on campus. There were some undergraduates, 55 and older, who would prefer to see costs associated with tuition, fees, and books eliminated or minimized. Multiple comments were made that the advisors and counselors lack knowledge regarding their job, mentoring, and the programs offered. Finally, a recommendation was made that the various services and offices (e.g. Financial Aid, Counseling, and Veteran's Affairs) adjust the staff work hours in order to stay open later in the evening; until 6:30 PM. Based on the responses, the crucial areas of concern were: parking due to limited mobility, class offerings, counseling, office hours, and financial costs. Many of the themes which emerged from the Open-Ended Questions were discussed by Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) which provides added validity to the responses from the participants.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

There have been several reasons for older people attending colleges and universities. Due to the increasing life span and rapid changes in the workplace, a myriad of people may have or are preparing for multiple careers. According to Mott (1999), people are living longer, working longer, and continuing to expand their knowledge. Choy (2002) noted that the development of personal enrichment, earning a degree, and employment skills were important considerations in the mature adults' decision to enroll. Finally, when considering the physiological changes of the aging student population (e.g. limited mobility), if institutions want to stay viable and successful for all ages, they must identify and implement enhancements throughout the various facets of the university (French & Bell, 1999a; Carnevale, 2003; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).

This study ascertained experiences of nontraditional undergraduates that were 50 years and older by using a quantitative approach combined with Open-Ended Questions to identify themes (Appendix A; Appendix B). At the same time, quantitative comparisons to their counterparts which were 25-49 were included within the analysis. Thematic summation, of the Educational Reasons and Open-Ended Questions for the respondents 50 and older were collated and identified.

### *Comparison between Literature and Results*

Nontraditional students make up 38% of postsecondary enrollment (Lord, 2005) and impact all levels of college (Maehl, 2004). Within the past 20 years, women have enrolled in college at greater rates, been more persevering, and obtained college degrees faster than male students (Peter & Horn, 2005). Women have surpassed their male peers in educational expectations, enrollment in postsecondary education, and college degrees (Freeman, 2004) which was validated with the research. For this survey, undergraduate females 50 and older outnumbered their male respondents; more than 71% were female.

Collegiate students include first-generation and multi-generation learners, some of which are in their mid-life and midcareer. Within this southwestern state university, 35.1% of the responding undergraduates 50 and older were first-generation students, 23.3% represented racial/ethnic minorities, 95.5% were commuters, and 60% were taking at least three courses a semester. The analysis from this research validates Cavote and Kopera-Frye (2007) who wrote that America's expanding diverse population has impacted the growth and enrollment in postsecondary institutions.

Reasons that a student may be involved with their academic education include new career, self improvement, professional advancement, social motivation, and children grown (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Kanter, 2006). The majority of the respondents selected the educational reasons provided in the survey. However, in the supplementary section, the respondents conveyed additional insight regarding their academic educational pursuit including fulfilling lifelong dreams, a passion for learning, finishing the education started years earlier, and becoming a role-model for their family. New career, self improvement, and professional advancement represented 79.1% of the responses.

Brown (2002) recommended seven strategies for universities and colleges to assist the nontraditional students. These were:

- recognizing student uniqueness by developing an accepting cultural perspective and campus communities,
- establishing services to meet their various requirements,
- developing and enhancing student services to become sensitive to nontraditional educational backgrounds,
- employing professional staff with strong encouraging and counseling skills,
- developing workshops and courses to assist these students,
- designing experiences and opportunities related to the student's specific requirements,
- and encouraging faculty to develop and utilize inclusive educational methods.

Additionally, Brown recommended colleges and universities establish support structures and high-quality instruction to strengthen nontraditional student motivation thereby sustaining their commitment towards higher educational goals. The suggestions by Brown (2002) were reiterated by the respondents as challenges and recommendations for this southwestern state university. Additionally, many of the themes which emerged from this analysis were reiterated by Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) and correlated to Brown's recommendations (2002) which provided added validity to the responses from the participants.

### *Key Findings*

The response rate of the undergraduate students 50 and older was 54.2%; 91 of the 168 eligible undergraduate students responded and completed the survey (Table 5). This is an above average survey participation rate which adds to the generalizability for this southwestern state university. Four main categories of the key findings were reviewed. They were (a) personal variables – such as gender – (Appendix A, p. 66), (b) Student Attainment (Appendix A, p. 62-65), (c) Academic Goal Orientation (Appendix B), and (d) thematic summations of Educational Reasons and Open-Ended Questions (Appendix A, p. 65).

*Personal variables.* The personal variables were race/ethnicity, gender, status, access, academic history, and income. The majority of the students were White followed by Latino and other racial/ethnic minorities (Table 6). The undergraduates between the ages of 25-49 showed a change in the racial/ethnic dynamics whereby the percentages of racial-ethnic minorities increased from 23.3% to 32.7%.

Female students outnumbered their male counterparts (Table 7). This result correlated with Freeman (2004) who stated that women have surpassed their male peers in educational expectations. However, the number of women 50 and older represented 71.1% of this group, whereas the 25-49 year old women represented 58.3% within their age group. Predictions for women's enrollment by Gerald and Hussar (2003) were that they would represent approximately 57% of the student population.

Sixty percent of the undergraduates were attending at least three courses a semester, 95.5% were commuters, over 35% were first-generation students, and their

household income level is distributed throughout the selected income ranges (Tables 8-11). An interesting note is that 4.5% of the adult students 50 and older live on campus.

*Student attainment.* Within the quantitative results for the Student Attainment survey (NSSE, 2008), statistically significant differences existed in the areas of Non-Academic Activities and Relationship Perceptions. The respondents were commuters, employed, had external commitments, and/or did not have time to attend many of the activities offered on campus or become involved with student organizations. As a result, many felt isolated from the full collegiate experience. They also had unsatisfactory experiences with faculty, administration, and other students. These negative perceptions were reiterated with comments provided in the Open-Ended Questions (Appendix A, p. 65). Mobility problems, poor advisers/counselors, limited course offerings (times and types), offices not opened late, and cost of tuition were the major areas of concern repeatedly identified by the undergraduates 50 and older.

*Academic goal orientation.* Undergraduates 50 and older demonstrated statistically significant differences along with a negative relationship in the areas of Proving Goal Orientation and Avoiding Goal Orientation with the Academic Goal Orientation survey (VandeWalle, 1997). These students are serious, focused, and demonstrate high educational goals: their emphasis is on learning.

*Thematic summations.* The section enriches and enhances the quantitative analysis. There were two sections within the thematic summations. The first area related to the educational reasons for the students working towards their degree (Appendix A, p. 66). The next section consisted of six free-form questions where the participants were

given an opportunity to answer and expound upon the areas they deemed important (Appendix A, p. 65).

Preset educational reasons which the undergraduate students 50 and older could select were new career, self improvement, professional advancement, social motivation, and children grown. In the supplementary section, the respondents conveyed additional insight regarding their academic educational pursuit including fulfilling lifelong dreams, a passion for learning, finishing the education started years earlier, becoming a role-model for their family, and a combination of the original reasons listed.

Suggestions for improvements correlated to the problems identified and related to mobility concerns, advising/counseling, courses, technical training, office hours, and tuition. Three suggestions related to mobility problems were to allow parking for 50 and older to be closer to the classrooms, increase the number of handicapped parking slots, and to improve the process for receiving handicap parking stickers. Advisors and counselors require better training and must become more knowledgeable about the departments they represent.

Students also want the courses offered at different times of the day; one possibility is to have the classes in the morning and afternoon for one semester and in the evening for the following semester. Connected with this theme is the suggestion to add more hybrid, internet, and evening courses along with podcasts for review.

Training for older adult students with limited technology acumen would be beneficial. A recommendation that was repeated throughout the survey was keeping offices open later; a possible option is alternating work schedules so employees stagger their start and stop times and/or working a 10 hour, four day week. Finally, lower or no

tuition and fees for students 55 and older would be very welcome for those with an income under \$30,000.

### Discussion

This study was specific to nontraditional students and focused on undergraduates who were 50 and older. Because there was minimal literature about older mature adults, comparisons between the findings and literature is limited. However, the results from this study will definitely add to the body of research for this age group. Although the results currently are not generalizable to other universities in the United States, these findings could probably be supported with further research.

For quantitative analysis, results from two test instruments were analyzed and compared between undergraduate students 50 and older to students 25-49 years old. The reliability of the constructs for Student Attainment (Appendix A, p. 62-65), ranged from marginal to very good and supported the findings in the statistical analysis (Table 12). Also, the statistically significant differences (Table 13) correlated to comments provided in the Open-Ended Question section (Appendix A, p. 65). Within Academic Goal Orientation (Appendix B), the reliability of the relationships between the older participants relative to their younger colleagues supported the findings in the statistical analysis (Table 14) and also correlated to comments provided in the Open-Ended Questions section; the adult students are attending this southwestern state university to learn.

The sections about reasons for an education contained a variety of information (Appendix A, p. 66). Educationally, besides the known reasons provided, other reasons included fulfilling lifelong dreams, a passion for learning, finishing the education started

years earlier, becoming a role-model for their family, and a combination of the reasons originally listed.

The free-form Open Ended Questions identified major themes and areas of concern. For students 50 and older, mobility and parking is a challenge. The class schedule and format types is limiting for nontraditional students. Numerous students feel as if they are treated as outcasts because the university emphasis regarding the availability of services and staff is for traditional students living on campus. There were some undergraduates, 55 and older, who would prefer to see costs associated tuition, fees, and books to be eliminated or minimized. Multiple comments were made about the advisors and counselors lack knowledge regarding their job, mentoring, and the programs offered. Finally, a recommendation was made that the various services and offices (e.g. Financial Aid, Counseling, and Veteran's Affairs) adjust the staff work hours in order to stay open later in the evening; until 6:30 PM.

The analysis identified gaps between what is needed and what exists. For the older student, mobility becomes a problem; therefore, available parking near classrooms is beneficial. Expansion of class offerings, types, and times would relieve frustration of students pursuing their degrees besides increasing the university's income. Extension of office hours, knowledgeable counselors, advisors, and staff, would greatly assist those students who attend classes in the evening.

#### Implications for Research

The purpose of this research study was to identify challenges and requirements for mature adults resulting with the retention of existing students and enticing future students. Input regarding the motivation and perseverance of these older students were

analyzed. Clearly, the results of this study indicated that the mature adult students have a strong desire to succeed in this academic endeavor. Concurrently, analysis revealed numerous obstacles and frustrations encountered by these respondents. Even though some research exists (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002); further research is advised.

Based on the literature and research results, preparing for the influx of older adult students is imperative to improving the viability, future success, and growth of this southwestern state university. Potential benefits included highlighting the current scholars' experiences, concerns, and requirements; the results aided in the identification of enhancements for the presumed influx of older nontraditional students. Now the question is where do we go from here?

There were interesting findings for further research. One was that 71.1% of undergraduate students who are 50 and older were female. Why is percentage so high? Is the increased percentage related to the women postponing their education when they were younger, the current unstable economy and job losses, divorce, or any other socio-economic reasons currently unknown? Another finding was that 82% of undergraduates between the ages of 25-49 were full-time students. Why is this occurring and is the increased percentage related to the current unstable economy and job losses? Will this percentage decrease when the economy improves? Finally, of special note, 4.5% of undergraduates 50 and older live on campus. Is this a trend related to this southwestern state university, what is the marital status of these older undergraduates, what is their economic status, and will this be noticeable in other United State college campus?

Another important area that requires further research relates to the undergraduates who are handicapped/disabled (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). Older disabled

students and veterans represent a growing sub-section of the student population. These groups of students require further research into their challenges, changes, and concerns. There is also a strong possibility this will become an important aspect for all handicapped students, especially the returning disabled veterans.

Finally, future analysis regarding the reasons for collegiate education and requirements related to the changes in the economy would be beneficial. Do the changes in the economy correlate to the percentages of adult undergraduates which attend college? If so, can forecasts be made relating to the time-frames for the adult student numbers in relation to the economic changes?

#### Implications for Practice

The findings from this study identify several major areas of concerns detailed by the survey participants. From this study, there are enough data for further analysis to analyze complex relationships among demographic variables and scores provided by the instruments used whereby a more complete statistical analysis on the results would provide a deeper insight into the results provided.

#### *Practice*

Based on analysis of the research, recommendations include:

*Advisors and counselors.* Improve training and implement an ongoing process which updates requirements about the departments being represented. Use a mentoring process, especially for the first year. Implement a procedure to have the students appraise the staff and services provided.

*Courses.* Offer the same courses at multiple times to adjust for the various commuter schedules. Include webcams at satellite campuses to minimize commuting. Add more hybrid and internet courses. Implement podcasts and webcams.

*Mobility problems.* Allow parking closer to the classrooms for those 50 and older. At the same time, increase handicap parking slots and simplify the process for receiving handicap parking approval.

*Office hours.* Expand the office hours from Monday through Thursday for administrative offices (e.g. Parking, Registrar, Veteran Affairs, and Financial Aid) to end at 6:30 PM; this coincides with the evening classes. To assist with this process, stagger employee work hours. Another possibility is some employees may prefer a 10-hour four-day work week.

#### *Final Thoughts*

French and Bell (1996b) referred to power stating: "The positive face of power is characterized by a socialized need to initiate, influence, and lead...[which] enables others to reach their goals as well as let the person exercising power reach his or her goal" (p.283). The recommendation for this southwestern state university is to enhance the organization, faculty, services, and educational programs to adjust for the continued growth of nontraditional adults. In addition, continued self-assessment every three to five years would keep the university current regarding the student population and their requirements.

Based on the literature and research results, preparing for the influx of older adult students is imperative to improving the viability, future success, and growth of this southwestern state university. Potential benefits included highlighting the current

scholars' experiences, concerns, and requirements where the results aid in the identification and necessary preparation for the presumed influx of older nontraditional students. An advantage with the growth of mature adult students would result in an expanding source of income for the university. Another benefit would be a more diversified student body where students of all ages, different ethnicities, and instructors may expand their knowledge while developing an understanding of a variety of view points within academia. Additionally, these older students could reflect positively on the university, thereby aiding in the potential growth of other family members and friends by imparting their relationships, knowledge, and positive experiences with this southwestern state university.

## APPENDIX A

### Student Engagement Survey

Focus on one of your current courses [and academic goals] and answer each question based on your experience and perceptions (NSSE, 2008).

#### Supportive Campus Environment

	Very much	Quite a bit	Some	Very Little
To what extent does this institution emphasize each of the following?				
1. Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Providing the support you need to thrive socially.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Attending campus events and activities (special speakers, cultural performances, athletic events, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Using computers in academic work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

#### Non Academic Activities

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never
During the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?				
1. Attended an art exhibit, play, dance, music, theatre, or other performance.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Participated in activities to enhance your spirituality (worship mediation, prayer, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Tried to better understand someone else's view by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Level of Academic Challenge

	Very Much	Quite a bit	Some	Very Little
During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities?				
1. Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Applying theories or concepts practical problems or in new situations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Academic and Personal Growth

	Very much	Quite a bit	Some	Very Little
To what extent has your experience in this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?				
1. Acquiring a broad general education.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Writing clearly and effectively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Speaking clearly and effectively.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Thinking critically and analytically.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Analyzing quantitative problems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Using computing and information technology.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Working effectively with others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Voting in local, state, or national elections.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Learning effectively on your own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Understanding yourself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Solving complex real-world problems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. Developing a personal code of values and ethics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Contributing to the welfare of your community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. Developing a deepened sense of spirituality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



## Evaluation Synopsis: advising and educational experience

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Overall, how would you evaluate the academic advising you have received at this institution?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

  

	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably no	Definitely no
If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Open Ended Questions

1. If there is one thing you would change about this institution, what would it be and how would the change benefit you (and maybe other students)?
2. What are the challenges you face as a student and how should this institution help you overcome them?
3. How is this institution (faculty, staff, and other students) assisting you in completing your academic goals?
4. Why are you pursuing this degree?
5. How do you plan to use this degree?
6. What else do you think others should know about your academic pursuit?

### Optional Questions to Assist in Analysis.

#### Race:

- White
- Black
- Latino
- Prefer not to answer
- Native American
- Asian
- Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial

#### Gender:

- Male
- Female

#### Degree sought

- Bachelors
- Masters
- Ph.D.

#### Age

- Under 25
- 25 to 49
- 50 and older

#### Status

- Full Time student (3 or more courses)
- Part Time student

#### Campus Access

- Commute
- Live on campus

#### Academic Family History

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Yes/No | First in Family to attend college (First Generation) |
| Yes/No | Parents or siblings have already attended college    |

#### Reason for Education

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Social Motivation        | <input type="radio"/> Children Grown |
| <input type="radio"/> Self Improvement         | <input type="radio"/> New Career     |
| <input type="radio"/> Professional Advancement | <input type="radio"/> Other          |

#### Household Income

- Less than \$30,000
- \$30,000 to \$50,000
- Greater than \$50,000

## Academic Goal Orientation Survey

**Instructions:** People have different ideas about the purpose of college. Read each statement below and select the statement that reflects how much you agree with the statement (VandeWalle, 1997).

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Sort of Agree	Neither Agree or disagree	Sort of disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I prefer challenging and difficult classes so that I'll learn a great deal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I truly enjoy learning for the sake of learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I like classes that really force me to think hard.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I'm willing to enroll in a difficult course if I can learn a lot by taking it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. It's important that others know that I am a good student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I think that it's important to get good grades to show how intelligent you are.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. It's important for me to prove that I am better than others in the class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. To be honest, I really like to prove my ability to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. I would rather drop a difficult class than earn a low grade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. I would rather write a report on a familiar topic so that I can avoid doing poorly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. I am more concerned about avoiding a low grade than I am about learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. I prefer to avoid situations in classes where I could risk performing poorly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. I enroll in courses in which I feel that I will probably do well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## APPENDIX C

### Survey Participation Request

Research is being conducted via a survey for a thesis regarding nontraditional students' challenges, perceptions, and recommendations. Your voluntary and anonymous participation regarding your experiences on campus is being requested for two reasons. First, the researcher, Anna Hom ([ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu)) is in the process of completing her masters in Continuing and Adult Education and the responses you provide will assist her in the process. Her chair is Dr. Robert F. Reardon ([rr46@txstate.edu](mailto:rr46@txstate.edu)). Second, the responses will also assist the Non Traditional Student Organization (NTSO - [www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso](http://www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso)) on campus.

A [consent form](#) describing the research, reasons, duration, confidentiality, and people to contact is attached for your review. Please print and keep a copy of this document for your records.

You have been asked to participate in this survey because you meet at least one of the requirements of a nontraditional student. Some identifying characteristics include returning or postgraduate student, parent or guardian, first generation student, commuter, full-time worker, military/veteran, and/or 25 and older.

This voluntary and anonymous online survey should take about 15 to 20 minutes. Your input will assist both Anna Hom, who is completing her thesis research, and NTSO in understanding your perceptions about the challenges encountered; identify recommendations for improvement; and recognize reasons for completing your education. Only your responses to the survey will be collected. The IRB approval number is 2009Y6157.

Please click on the link provided below and complete this survey within the next 10 days. By clicking on the link, you are stating that you have read and understand the [consent form](#), and agree to participate in this research. If you prefer, copy the survey link and paste it into the title bar above. In addition, you may opt out of the survey at any time. Please print a copy of this email and consent form for your record.

The link for this survey is

<http://survey.education.txstate.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll?I.Project=REARDON1>

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions or are interested with the results after the completion of the thesis, please contact Anna Hom at [ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu) where a summary of the findings will be provided to participants, if requested. In the future, NTSO will also have this information for review. If you are interested in seeing a report of our findings, please contact me at [ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu) and I will send you a copy of our findings.

## APPENDIX D

### Consent Form for Online Survey

Research is being conducted via a survey for a thesis regarding nontraditional students' challenges, perceptions, and recommendations while obtaining a master degree at Texas State University-San Marcos. With this particular assignment, data gathering and survey analysis from students here at Texas State is being done to fulfill a requirement for the completion of my thesis in the College of Education at Texas State University. Your survey responses will be used for the completing my thesis and by the Non Traditional Student Organization (NTSO).

Your participation regarding your experiences on campus is being requested for two reasons. First, I, Anna Hom ([ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu)) am in the process of completing my masters in Continuing and Adult Education and the responses you provide will assist me in the process. My chair is Dr. Robert F. Reardon ([rr46@txstate.edu](mailto:rr46@txstate.edu)). Second, the responses will also assist the NTSO ([www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso](http://www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso)) on campus.

During the past few decades, the student population and reasons for attending college has changed. Some reasons given include increased life expectancy, growth in the older student population, multiple careers, and changes with the dynamics of the institutions. Because of this, learning about students, their challenges, and perceptions is important for all who are involved within an educational institution. For the thesis portion of the survey, the researcher, Anna Hom, will review the university experience of older students which represents a growing percentage within the university. In addition, the results will also assist the NTSO on campus.

This voluntary and anonymous online survey should take about 15 to 20 minutes. Your input will assist both NTSO and myself in understanding your perceptions about the challenges encountered; identify recommendations for improvement; and recognize reasons for completing your education. Survey questions include a section regarding your overall evaluation of your advising and educational experience and relationship perceptions.

Your name and email was selected by the Texas State Institutional Research and the researcher will neither know the identities of the subjects nor be able to link subjects to their responses as fitting a set of criteria for this research. Texas State Institutional Research is mailing this link to you. NTSO and I will not ever see the names or other identifying information. This is why your participation is anonymous. Only your responses to the survey will be collected. The IRB approval number is 2009Y6157.

The data will be maintained indefinitely by the student performing the research. The survey responses will be erased from Texas State computers after completion of the degree program (less than 12 months). Aggregate data (means, mediums, standard deviations, etc. will be provided to the Texas State NTSO and will become a part of the school's permanent records. Recall that no identifying data are collected and the responses are anonymous.

By completing the survey, you acknowledge that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with the University or any other relevant organization/entity with which you are associated. You may choose to not answer any question for any reason. You understand that you are free to answer all or none of the questions I ask you and provide only the information that you feel is appropriate or relevant to my assignment.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions or are interested with the results after the completion of the thesis, please contact Anna Hom at [ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu) where a summary of the findings will be provided to participants, if requested. In the future, NTSO will also have this information for review. If you are interested in seeing a report of our findings, please contact me at [ah1455@txstate.edu](mailto:ah1455@txstate.edu) and I will send you a copy of our findings.

Any pertinent questions about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 – [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)), or to Ms. Becky Northcut, Compliance Specialist (512-245-2102).

Please remember that your responses will remain confidential.

Please print and keep a copy of this document for your records. Thank you for your participation.

NOTE: The purpose of the Non-Traditional Student Organization (NTSO) is to provide a support network, learning atmosphere, social activities, and an opportunity for returning students to integrate into campus life. NTSO is intended to be a leader in university pride and loyalty, a voice for the nontraditional student, and active participant in university events. NTSO also sponsors campus programs that support nontraditional students and collaborates with other student organizations. More information concerning NTSO and the location of the member lounge can be found at [www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso](http://www.lbjsc.txstate.edu/ntso).

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## VITA

Anna Louise Hom was born in Chicago, Illinois, on March 21, 1950, the daughter of Lillian Arlene Banner Lally Gavett and Thomas Patrick Lally. After completing her work at Edison High School, Edison, New Jersey in 1968, she attended the College of Environmental and Biological Sciences (formerly known as the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences and Cook College) at Rutgers University. Anna received her degree of Bachelor of Science and two teaching certificates from this university in January 1973 and started her work career as a science teacher. A few years later, she was employed by The Prudential as a Programmer Analyst, Area Leader, and eventually a Senior Systems Analyst in Holmdel, New Jersey. After moving from New Jersey, she was employed as a Systems Analyst at the McHenry County Government Center in Woodstock, Illinois. In 2003, Anna and her family moved to San Antonio, Texas, and she worked part-time as a substitute teacher. In August 2007, Anna entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos.

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This thesis was typed by Anna L. Hom.



