

**A Needs Assessment of Student Support Programs for Adult Students
at Tri-County Technical College**

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Studies

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Situated in a national landscape of looming decreasing enrollment trends for traditional-aged students, institutions of higher education would do well to consider how to support the persistence of non-traditional students. The definition of non-traditional students can include a wide spectrum of descriptors. This study narrowed that definition to consider adult students, who are 25 years of age or older. The decision to persist is different for adult students at commuter colleges than for traditional-aged students at residential four-year institutions (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014). Adult students have a different approach to decision making influenced by their life experiences and related cognitive scheme (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Tri-County Technical College has identified the adult student population as an important population to focus on in the coming years as the number of available traditional-aged students decreases (Grawe, 2014). With this in mind, it is important to consider how Tri-County can best support its adult students to persist to their education goal.

This needs assessment study identified several existing gaps between needs of adult students at Tri-County and the student support programs and structures at Tri-County Technical College. Through a series of focused conversations, the experiences of adult students were examined to identify those factors that support and those factors that complicate their ability remain enrolled. Comparing these factors to the focus of non-academic student support programs and structures at Tri-County led to the identification of several existing gaps. These gaps

comprised the identified needs. Ultimately, a series of six recommendations were provided as opportunities for how Tri-County can adjust its efforts support adult student persistence.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the two most important women in my life. First, to my mother, Jonni Dougherty. Mom, you started this journey with me but didn't finish. You passed on your love of reading to me, which I credit for my passion for lifelong learning. Your love and support throughout my life made me the person I am today. Second to my wife, Amanda Dougherty. Your continual support, love, and patience throughout this process has made all the difference. Simply put: You are amazing; I couldn't have done it without you.

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To my advisor, Dr. Linda DeAngelo, goes my greatest thanks for your guidance in this process. You have been a wonderfully engaged and responsive partner in this journey. I appreciate your candor and genuine concern for my success. Your humor was always evident in our feedback conversations; we always laughed at something. Juggling life, work, and dissertation wasn't always easy, but you provided the right amount of support and encouragement. Thank you so much!

Lastly, I want to thank my family for their support. To my wife, Amanda, you've been wonderfully patient and supportive through this process. You never complained about the amount of time I spent working or the number of times you had to take the boys somewhere by yourself while I worked. To my boys, Glen and Madden, thank you for understanding when Daddy wasn't always able to play or be with you because of school. As a family, your excitement for me at graduation was worth the wait and effort to get there.

1.0 Introduction to the Problem of Practice

Post-secondary institutions are facing a critical point in their history. Society is questioning the value of a college degree. Small colleges are struggling financially, with some small colleges closing due to their inability to sustain a fiscally-sound operation (Setzer, 2017). Demographic trends and enrollment projections foretell a shrinking population of potential students (Grawe, 2018; Hussar & Bailey, 2018). In these times, institutions will need to consider alternate enrollment populations and work to encourage those students that ultimately enroll to persist. This study proposes to look at the persistence of nontraditional students, focusing on the influence of the institution's student support programs.

1.1 Clarification of Key Terms

Many of the terms that will be used in this study have multiple definitions. Before discussing this problem of practice and associated study further, it is important to define certain terms that will be used. These definitions will also help delimit the scope and application of this study by identifying more concretely the denotation of these terms in the context of this study. Specifically, it is important to understand how the following terms will be used: traditional student, nontraditional student, adult student, persistence, and retention.

1.1.1 Traditional, Nontraditional, and Adult Students

College students each come from individual situations and circumstances that make it difficult to categorize them homogeneously. The following definitions of traditional and nontraditional students are synthesized from multiple sources (e.g. Capps, 2010; Dilly & Henley, 1998; Sorey & Duggan, 2008) that describe traditional and nontraditional students. Traditional students are the students that most people think of when the term “college student” is used. These students are aged 18-24 years of age and are often coming to college directly from high school or with a short interlude between. While they often live on campus or in off-campus housing close to their college, traditional students are often still dependent on parents and family structures. Traditional students usually do not have families of their own to support.

Nontraditional is a comprehensive term that encompasses students in a variety of situations. Nontraditional students are often older, 25 years of age or older. These students are often supporting themselves and may have families of their own. First-generation college students and students who are coming to college after significant time spent in the workplace are also considered nontraditional students. Nontraditional students often have competing priorities to their academic life.

For the purpose of this study, I considered nontraditional students as a function of age. The non-traditional students included in the study were 25 years of age or older. For simplicity, these students are referred to as adult students throughout this study. This simpler term will help differentiate between the broader nontraditional delineation and provide a focus for the direction of this study.

1.1.2 Persistence vs. Retention

Retention and persistence are terms that are closely related and are often used interchangeably. However, the two terms are distinct. Hagedorn (2012) clarifies that retention refers to an institutional function, while persistence is a function of the student. More directly put, “institutions retain, and students persist” (Hagedorn, 2012, p. 91). These terms both imply a positive measure that describes students staying at an institution. In contrast, attrition refers to the loss of students for different factors and results from reduced retention (Hagedorn, 2012).

Persistence of college students has been studied extensively, often influenced and framed by the seminal work of Tinto (1993) and Bean (1990; 2003), which had residential four-year institutions as a focus (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & Mclendon, 2014; Hagedorn, 2012). However, the models described by Tinto and Bean have faced criticism related to their applicability to adult and commuter populations (Braxton et al., 2014). Research into the persistence of community college students explores those factors that influence a student's decision to persist or drop out (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Bremer, Center, Opsal, Medhanie, Jang, Geise, 2013; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008). These influences include individual factors related to the student and organizational characteristics that are related to the educational institution.

1.2 Problem Area

When considering the phenomenon of adult students and their persistence at higher education institutions it is important to understand the looming demographic and enrollment trends

that all sectors of higher education will work with in the next 10 years. These trends do not paint a positive picture for enrollment, especially related to traditional students. The number of high school graduates overall is decreasing (Grawe, 2018). In his book, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, Grawe (2018) indicates that the birth rate since 2008 has been dropping, which will result in a peak of high school graduates in 2026 and then sharply decrease for the following years. Hussar and Bailey (2018), in a report for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), provide the following analysis of existing data and projected trends. Enrollment in higher education institutions will continue to increase from 2015 to 2026, but in a slower manner than from 2001 to 2015. Traditional student enrollment is projected to increase 17% over this time frame, and adult students 9%, compared to 26% and 25% respectively from 2001 to 2015. While these numbers present a slowing in enrollment, they still represent an increase. This trend reverses sharply after 2026, which represents a peak in enrollment. Grawe (2018) analyzed birth rates starting in 2008 and predicts that after 2026, there will be a sharp decrease in the number of high school students who will graduate each year. International and adult students are two populations that represent enrollment opportunities (Grawe, 2018). However, International students were outside the scope of this study and were not included in the study population. The projected continued increase of adult student enrollment (Hussar & Bailey, 2018) suggest that institutions can look to the adult student population as an opportunity to bolster retention after 2026.

The persistence of students is a key concern for colleges and institutions. While community colleges at one time enjoyed robust support from state and local governments to provide the majority of their operating budgets, this has changed (Sutin, Derrico, Raby, & Valeau, 2011). Revenue from individual student tuition now comprises the majority of community college budgets, making the retention and persistence of students a key component of an institution's

operational plan. This change requires community colleges to pay particular attention to the recruitment and retention of students as it costs less to retain a student than to recruit one (Bean, 2003).

Adult community college students complete college at different rates than younger students. The National Student Clearinghouse reports the 6-year completion rate (earned a credential within 6 years) for full-time adult students was 36.5%, compared to 42.4% for students under 20, and 26.6% for those aged 20-24 (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2016). The rates differ for part-time versus full-time students, but with similar trends. Traditional and adult students have different life experiences and situations which contribute to the individual student's ability to engage in the academic process to meet their goals. This phenomenon is more closely explored in the second chapter.

To put this problem succinctly, institutions cannot rely upon traditional students as a guaranteed population available for enrollment. Taking the national demographic and enrollment trends and projections into account, institutions will need to identify alternate student populations to attract and retain. It will also be extremely important that institutions be able to support the persistence of the students that do enroll. Although retaining students is fundamental to the operation of any institution, understanding the persistence of students in community college settings is of increasing importance to the contemporary landscape of higher education (Bean, 2003). Grawe (2018) projects that the demographic and enrollment trends will hit two-year institutions, including community colleges, more harshly than four-year institutions. Providing an academic experience and student support environment that encourages student persistence and retention is critical to the continued success of institutions.

1.3 Problem of Practice

While this problem is pervasive in all sectors of higher education, the scope of this study considered this problem in the context of a single community college in South Carolina. Situated in a national trend of slowing enrollment, South Carolina trends are similar, with a slightly more positive outlook for available high school graduates through 2026 (5% higher than in 2013) (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). However, a similar decrease in high school graduates will hit South Carolina after 2026 (Grawe, 2018). This decrease in available traditional aged students suggests that higher education institutions will need to focus on supporting other demographics than traditional students.

This problem of slowing enrollment is problematic for the South Carolina Technical College System (SCTCS), which includes all technical and community colleges in South Carolina. The average enrollment in the SCTCS has declined each year since 2011 (SCCHE, 2017). According to data available from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the number of students who enroll in college in general immediately following the completion of high school is declining, a trend that also holds true for South Carolina (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). This trend implies that institutions must work to encourage persistence of current students as much as they work to enroll new students. As discussed further in the next chapter, there are individual factors and organizational characteristics that influence a student's decision to persist at a particular institution. Understanding that adult students bring life experiences and situations that can present barriers to success, attention to creating and sustaining support mechanisms for these students is key to the success of the college. By providing resources and programs that support challenges connected to these factors and characteristics, institutions can contribute positively to a situation where persistence is more likely. This problem of practice centers around the desire for the SCTCS

to help student meet their educational goals, acknowledging that the student population after 2026 may look different than it does currently.

1.4 Tri-County Technical College Students

Most students at two-year colleges come from within the service area of that institution, with few out-of-state students (Grawe, 2018). Tri-County Technical College's service area is comprised of three contiguous South Carolina counties, Anderson County, Oconee County, and Pickens County. Seventy-one percent of students enrolled at Tri-County in fall 2017 came from the three-county service area and 94% overall came from South Carolina (Tri-County Technical College, 2017). While not discounting the national enrollment and demographic trends, this high percentage of students concentrated from the local service area requires the institution to consider its local demographic trends (Grawe, 2018). This need for local context sparked Tri-County to think critically about its future enrollment possibilities. Through a study of high school enrollment trends and population trends in the service area, Tri-County determined that the largest growing student demographic for the institution will be adult students (Tri-County Technical College, 2016).

Tri-County enrolls students with a variety of educational backgrounds and life situations. Three technical academic divisions (Health Education, Engineering and Industrial Technology, and Business and Public Services) offer credentials through certificate, diploma, and associate degree programs, preparing students to enter a career field without a further degree. A fourth academic division, Arts and Sciences, affords students the opportunity to earn a certificate in

University Studies or an associate degree in arts or sciences. Most students in the Arts and Sciences division have a goal to transfer to a four-year institution.

The student population at Tri-County includes students situated in different life stages and with different educational goals. Tri-County has a dual enrollment program for high school students to earn college credit. The Bridge to Clemson program is a joint program with Clemson University that is comprised of 18-19-year-old students whose goal is to transfer to Clemson in one year. Bridge to Clemson students live on campus at Clemson and take classes at Tri-County. Students who are not enrolled in one of these two programs represent a diverse collection of students including traditional students, student veterans, first-generation college students, legacy students, students returning mid-career, students looking to transfer to another educational institution, and students with educational goals that will be fulfilled at Tri-County. This list is not exhaustive of the different categorizations that exist.

1.5 Existing Student Support Programs

Similar to many institutions of higher education, Tri-County offers support structures and programs to its students, both traditional and adult. All the student support programs currently available are open to both traditional and adult students and are coordinated by different college departments, both academic and non-academic. While academic support programs do present an opportunity to support adult students, for the purposes of this study, only those non-academic student support programs were included. These non-academic programs are those that are voluntary and do not result in the accumulation of academic credit. Examples of these programs at Tri-County include the Leading Edge Experience, Leading Edge Skillshops, the Tutoring

Center, supplemental instruction, Career and Employability Resources, the Money Management Center and budgeting programs, and connection to supplemental resources. The Leading Edge Experience (LEE) is Tri-County's comprehensive co-curricular engagement model. Students who engage in the LEE accumulate points towards incentives and participate in events that provide them the opportunity to learn about and practice employability skills outside the academic classroom. The Leading Edge Skillshops are workshops that focus on employability skills such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, digital literacy, and integrated learning. Connecting students to supplemental and external resources is part of the services that Wellness Programs offers. Wellness Programs staff meet with students individually to help them navigate College processes and help them connect to community agencies and programs to meet practical life needs, such as health care, utility assistance, housing, nutrition, and transportation needs.

Tri-County has used various methods to assess the efficacy of these programs. Students are surveyed on a regular basis (usually each fall and spring term). Students participate in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) every two years. One-off assessments of individual programs and events are done, although not consistently. Many of these efforts seek to obtain input from the student body as a whole and are not targeted at a specific subset of students. These assessments have provided information about the specific individual event and what content the student may have learned by participating. However, these assessments have not generally collected information in such a way that the results from these assessments are applicable directly to adult students. This highlights a need to collect information specific to the adult student population.

1.6 Stakeholders

Stakeholders related to this study can be divided into two broad categories, internal and external. Stakeholders internal to the study include those constituencies who are involved in the operation of or attend the institutions. Internal stakeholders include college employees, students, and SCTCS administrators. Specifically, employees in the Student Support and Engagement division can use the information identified in this study to inform future practices and programs. The Student Support and Engagement division includes Student Development, Career and Employability Resources, the Testing Center, and the Learning Commons (which collectively includes The Tutoring Center and the Library). As a result, students may ultimately see changed academic offerings or support services or both. These academic offerings will affect the careers that students will be qualified to pursue. This connects to the external stakeholders, including local employers. Employers rely on Tri-County to provide a qualified workforce. This workforce in turn influences economic development and maintains the local economy. Community members benefit from a stable and healthy local economy.

1.7 Overview of Study

This study sought to identify gaps that exist in support programs available to adult students. By collecting information from adult students about the individual and organizational characteristics that impact their persistence decision, this produced a set of recommendations for Tri-County. As referenced previously, the adult student population at Tri-County is predicted to grow. With this growth in mind, it is beneficial for Tri-County to consider what influences

contribute to the adult student's decision to stay at Tri-County. This study provided direct feedback and useful information for this purpose.

This study was designed as a needs assessment and used participation in focus groups for adult students as the primary data collection method. These focus groups solicited information from adult students about the factors and influences that affected their decision and ability to remain enrolled. Information was collected to determine which student support programs adult students used. This usage information and data related to factors and influences were analyzed through qualitative techniques to explore the factors influencing persistence of these students, as related to these student support programs. As outlined later in the theoretical framework and literature review, the persistence of adult students is influenced by the interaction of individual factors and organizational characteristics. This interaction in the local context of Tri-County adult students comprised the core of this needs assessment.

This study's goal was to identify the gaps that exist between the factors and influences that affect adult student persistence and the factors and influences that current student support programs address. This gap identified the need that was not being met by these student support programs. The analysis of this need in the context of existing student support programs resulted in recommendations for Tri-County related to the following topics:

1. Modifying and adjusting current structures and programs to be more efficacious,
and
2. Creating new student support structures and programs to meet the identified need.

1.8 Significance of Study

Tri-County measures its success with a variety of metrics, considered through different categories. The organization of this analysis is often around academic program and division. Little information exists specifically related to the difference in success measures between traditional and adult students. This lack of direct information about adult student success was a contributing factor to the significance of this study. Another deficit was the analysis of student support programs and how they have contributed to the decision of students, traditional or adult, to persist at Tri-County. This study provided data to help address this deficit.

I work for Tri-County as the Dean of Student Development. My department and division coordinates many of the support structures and programs and systems at Tri-County. By identifying which factors influence the persistence of adult students, Student Development can coordinate and create programs designed to better support students. Prior research has identified the influence of both organizational characteristics and individual factors related to student persistence retention, such as institution size, tuition level, adjunct faculty use, expenditures per student, degree offering, financial aid, course offerings, prior academic preparation, educational goals, previous academic achievement, college preparatory experiences, family background, prior school experience, educational goals and intentions. (Barnett, 2010; Bean, 1990; Braxton et al., 2014; Bremer, Center, Opsal, Medhanie, Jang, & Geise, 2013; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gillman, 2016; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Tinto, 1993). This problem of practice identified which of these factors apply to Tri-County students and informed the identification of the gaps that exist between the factors are impactful and the factors that student support programs address, which effectively identified the need that is not being addressed. This study provided recommendations about how Tri-County can address this need

through structures and programs that could increase adult student persistence, and ultimately have a positive impact on adult student retention. These recommendations include suggestions for the creation of new programs, or the refinement of existing programs.

As discussed earlier, retention and persistence have different denotations. The differentiation between these two concepts is important to understand in the context of this study. As discussed in more detail in later sections, this study proposed to learn more about the persistence decision of adult students. By studying the persistence decision, institutions can work to increase retention. When examined side by side, the outcome is similar, the student staying at the institution. However, approaching this study from the persistence perspective allowed me to focus on the student experience, with the intent of informing the institutions retention efforts through the management of student support programs.

1.9 Connection to Literature Review

This study was positioned in a national and local context of slowing enrollment and the need to support adult student persistence. While the setting of this study is at Tri-County, it's important to consider what is already known about the persistence decision of adult students and what institutions are doing to support that persistence. In the next chapter, the theoretical framework and a review of current literature provide a more detailed context for this study.

2.0 Review of the Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

There are several theories and models related to college student retention and persistence, influenced by one of the following perspectives: organizational, sociological, or psychological (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014). A prominent sociological model is Tinto's integration model (1993). Tinto's model is widely cited in literature related to college student persistence. The core of Tinto's model asserts that academic and social integration of the student positively influences a student's commitment to the college and to the goal of graduation. The greater the commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation, the more likely a student will persist.

One might assume that this model would provide the appropriate framework within which to situate this study. Among other critiques, criticism of Tinto's model addresses its applicability to students at commuter institutions, which includes community colleges. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) analyzed the results from multiple empirical studies into Tinto's integration model to determine to what extent this model is supported empirically. In short, they concluded that Tinto's model was partially supported, lacking relevance when applied to students at commuter institutions. In particular, several of the core propositions of Tinto's model presented significant problems when applied to a commuter institution. At the core of these criticisms is the inability to apply several core tenets of Tinto's model to the student population at commuter institutions. Tinto's model was developed using a traditional residential student population; further research

into this model has clarified that Tinto’s model is not applicable to adult and commuter populations, which are prevalent at community colleges.

Building upon the results from this prior study, Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, and McLendon (2014) outlined a model for persistence of students at commuter colleges. This model compensates for the deficiencies discovered in their review of the applicability of Tinto’s model, as discussed above. Braxton et al. (2014) consider persistence as a complex decision by the student, influenced by the student’s entry characteristics, external environment, and institutional commitment. Institutional commitment is further refined to incorporate an initial commitment, which is refined into a subsequent view of institutional commitment, influenced by the intellectual and academic development of the student. The student’s perception of the institution’s organizational characteristics (institutional integrity and commitment to student welfare) strongly influences this intellectual and academic development. Figure 1 presents this relationship.

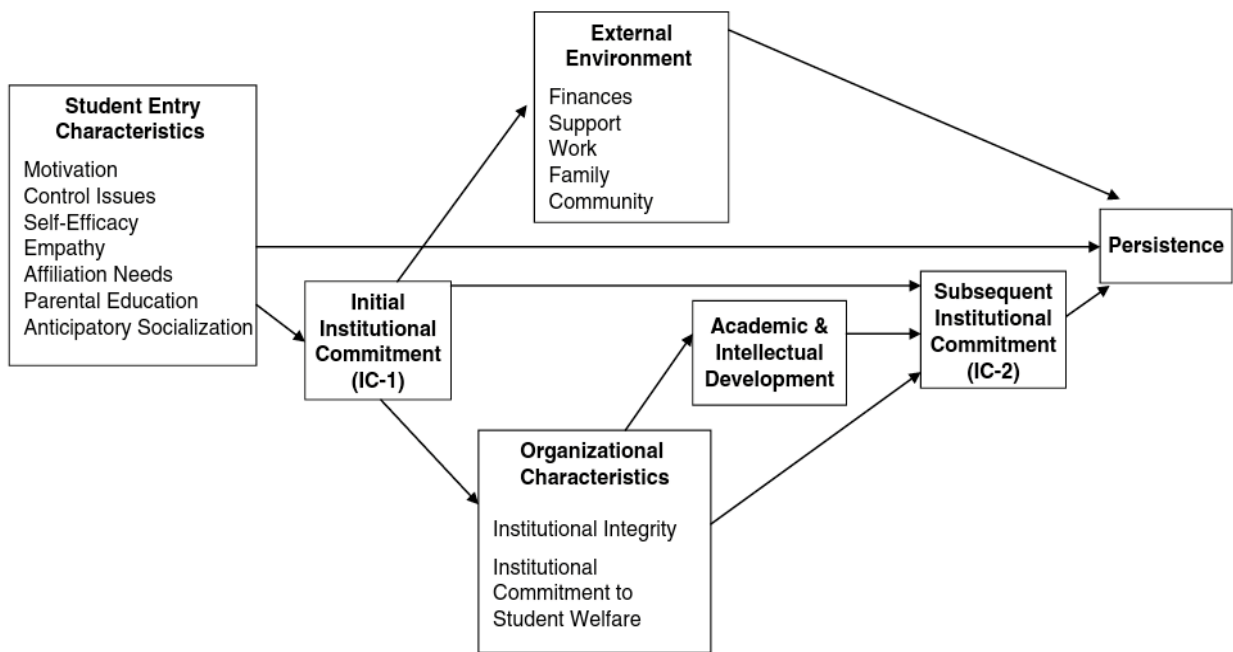


Figure 1 Theory of student persistence in commuter colleges and universities

(Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014). Copyright © 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Braxton et al. (2014) describe 11 propositions that influence a commuter student's decision to persist. These propositions deal with parental educational level, student motivation, cost of attendance, support from significant others, need for social affiliation, student's perception of institutional commitment to student welfare, student's perception of institutional exhibition of integration, and the intellectual and academic development as influenced by the preceding factors. It is important to note that these factors address environmental and personal factors that Tinto's integration model does not.

While Braxton et al.'s (2014) model addresses the commuter nature of the intended study population, adult students at a community college, it does not specifically take into consideration the difference between traditional and adult students and how the decision to persist may differ between the two types of students. To address this deficit, this theoretical framework also considers the factors outlined in Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model of college outcomes for adults, which describes the factors that influence the persistence decision of adult students. These factors are prior experiences, orienting frameworks, the academic classroom as the center of social and academic engagement, adult cognition processes, concurrent obligations, and learning outcomes.

Prior experience refers to the experiences that adult students have had, which includes formal learning experiences, work, family life, and community service. These experiences influence the student's motivation, confidence, and value systems. Using these experiences, adult students create psychosocial and value orientation frameworks. These frameworks influence the adult student's learning experience and affect their responses to new situations.

As many adult students prioritize their non-class time with work and family, they rely on the classroom to be the connection between new content and the learning experience (Donaldson

& Graham, 1999). This reliance on the classroom creates an expectation that the classroom will be focused and productive. Many adult students look for an immediate connection of the classroom experience and content to their educational goal. When the classroom is not seen in such a way, this can negatively influence the persistence decision.

According to Donaldson and Graham (1999)_ adult cognition processes refer to those already developed cognitive structures and learning processes that adult students possess, as well as those they are developed concurrently with the college experience. These cognitive processes are the mechanisms adult students use to manage their learning, influenced by the orientation frameworks discussed above. Concurrent obligations that exist in the adult student's life outside the academic experience also contribute significantly to the persistence decision. The adult student's concurrent obligations can reinforce positive structures to be academically successful or negate them. When there is conflict between the two obligations, this can significantly affect the persistence decision in a negative manner.

Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model contends that adult students view their learning outcomes in different ways. They suggest that adult students examine their learning and differentiate between learning that is required to pass a test, learning that increases knowledge, and learning that can be applied in their work and life situations. As these students differentiate between these types of learning, they may experience dissonance between their expected outcomes and the outcomes that they perceive as supported by the institution. For example, adult students may consider their education successful once they have completed one class and gain specific knowledge or a skill, while the institution may consider academic success to be degree attainment. This dissonance can influence the persistence decision; an adult student may decide to leave the institution at a time unexpected by the institution.

The theoretical framework for this study considered an intersection of Braxton et al.'s theory of student persistence in commuter institutions and Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model of college outcomes for adults. Braxton et al. describe the factors and experiential influences that contribute to the persistence decision of adult students but do not specifically consider that adult students may have a different decision-making process than traditional-aged students. While both traditional and adult students experience similar factors when deciding to persist, adult students consider this decision through a different lens. The theoretical framework of this study uses Donaldson and Graham's model as this lens, compensating for the deficit in Braxton et al.'s theory by including additional factors that are important in the decision-making process for adult students.

This framework describes a set of factors and organizational characteristics that interact to create a situation in which the student can successfully persist. The interplay of these factors and characteristics creates the opportunity for the adult student to be able to remain at the institution. The converse exists when the interaction between these factors and organizational characteristics is not sufficient to create the same opportunity. This study explored how student support structures and programs at Tri-County are providing support and resources for students to address these factors. The study is designed as a needs assessment, which helped identify the gaps that exist between the individual factors that are impacting adult students at Tri-County and the organizational characteristics that mitigate the negative impacts of these factors. These gaps identified the need that is not being met through the current slate of student support structures and programs. Through this study, recommendations were made to assist Tri-County in refining existing student support structures and programs or developing new student support structures and programs to address the identified need.

2.2 Literature Review

Using the theoretical framework as an organizing guide, this literature review explored the factors that influence the decision of a student to persist at an institution: organizational characteristics and individual factors. Organizational characteristics include concepts such as institutional descriptors, institutional integrity, institutional commitment to student welfare, and academic and intellectual development (Braxton et al., 2014). Individual factors are those within the control of the student or are circumstances that the student experiences which are outside the control of the institution, including the following concepts from the theoretical framework: the student's entry characteristics and external environment (Braxton et al., 2014). Institutional factors are those factors that are inherent to the institution and are controllable by or inherent to the institution. While the focus of this literature review is on community colleges, some studies discussed were completed using students from four-year institutions. In these cases, the relevance of the findings is discussed in relation to community colleges.

2.2.1 Individual Factors

2.2.1.1 Student entry characteristics.

Students enter the college environment with certain characteristics that are influenced by the student's prior personal and academic experiences. These entry characteristics play an important part in the longitudinal decision to remain at an institution (Braxton et al., 2014). A selection of these entry characteristics is represented in Figure 1 but does not present an exhaustive list of entry characteristics. Several entry characteristics contribute directly to the student's initial commitment to the institution, including academic ability and academic success in high school.

This initial commitment to the institution contributes to the subsequent institutional commitment resulting from attending the institution (Braxton et al., 2014).

2.2.1.1 Motivation

Motivation is an important individual factor that affects a student's decision to persist, as well as a positive influence on academic success. Motivation is characterized as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is "doing an activity for its inherent satisfactions" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). Extrinsic motivation is performing an activity "in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). Type of motivation differs from student to student. Liao, Ferdenzi, and Edlin (2012) suggest that extrinsic motivation is more powerful than intrinsic motivation when applied to community college student persistence. Fong, Davis, Y. Kim, Y.W. Kim, Marriott, and S. Kim (2016) indicate motivation and self-perception as two powerful influencers in the decision to re-enroll. Positive self-perception of learning skills was positively associated with high motivation.

Non-traditional students may view extrinsic rewards as directly applicable to not only their educational goals, but also their personal goals. Family commitments are a prevalent competing priority for adult students. Many adult students indicate that providing a better life and improved financial situation for their families is a main goal (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). Meeting this goal results in material reward for their families and themselves. While there may be an internal satisfaction as well, the external reward seems to be more important. Non-traditional students for whom finances are a primary concern consider the availability of financial aid process and affordability to be an important contributor to returning from semester to semester (Markle, 2015).

2.2.1.2 Self-efficacy.

Complementary to the student's motivation is the student's ability to self-regulate their learning experience moderated by their confidence in this self-regulation. Liao, Ferdezni, and Edlin (2012) examined this self-regulation efficacy in an urban community college setting with a variety of student types, including adult students. Self-regulation includes the ability of the student to manage time effectively and organize their learning experience efficiently. While not all adult students may be experts in this area they often have competing priorities, such as family and work, that have required them to develop these skills. Non-traditional students seem to regulate their learning better than traditional students (Liao et al., 2012). Liao et al. (2012) suggest this may be due to the under-development of these self-efficacy skills in adult students.

2.2.1.2 External environment.

Some entry characteristics also influence how students incorporate external environment characteristics into their decision to persist. Students at commuter institutions, including adult students, often have family and work obligations that affect their commitment to attending college. Conflicts between academic and external factors may negatively affect one or the other. When the effect and influence from non-academic obligations and factors is negatively perceived, the decision to leave the institution is greater.

Individual factors also influence the decision and ability for an adult student to persist. Individual factors are those that are student-specific and are carried with the student into the educational environment (Bean, 1990). Individual factors reference life and family situations which compete with academics for the attention and focus of the adult student. Non-traditional students often have competing obligations and priorities that can conflict with the academic experience. Capps (2010) identifies the most prevalent competitors as family and work. Each of

these competing priorities requires significant time, effort, and resources. This can affect the student's decision to be full-time or part-time, whether that is in consideration of money or time or both (Capps, 2010).

Cox, Reason, Nix, and Gillman (2016) examined the individual factor of non-college life-events. Non-college life-events were defined as those events which were non-institutionally controlled and resulted in changed relationships, roles, and belief patterns for the student. This study focused on three types of these non-college life-events, grief from a death, financial interference, and psychological interference. Death of a family member was the most common non-college life-event that students involved in the study experienced. The results indicated that any negative non-college life-event had a negative impact on the persistence of the student, measured by graduating on time. Students who had already established coping mechanism and support systems were better able to persist than those that did not.

Financial interference included events such as an employment change or loss of parental financial support. Psychologic interference included events such as loss of a family member and other traumatic life events. Experiencing any of these types of events was negatively associated with persisting to graduation. Cox et al.'s study was not completed with community college students, but similar life events can happen in the lives of adult students at community colleges. Their findings can be applicable to students from a variety of institutions.

2.2.2 Organizational Characteristics

Organizational characteristics include those that are characteristics and factors controllable by or inherent to the institution. These characteristics include institution size, rules, financial assistance, developmental education programs, faculty relationships, and scheduling structures.

These institutional factors provide the environment in which the adult student learns. The decision to persist is influenced by these factors through the students' interactions with this environment (Bean, 1990). Institution size exhibits an inverse relationship with persistence measures at community colleges. Larger community colleges were found to exhibit lower persistence rates (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008).

2.2.2.1 Institutional commitment.

Institutional commitment to the welfare and success of the student is important to the persistence decision. Students who feel that they are directly supported by the institution will be more likely to consider remaining at the institution (Braxton et al., 2014). This institutional commitment is exhibited through the structures and processes that an institution implements to support students and address the individual factors the student is dealing with. These institutional commitment structures include financial aid programs,

2.2.2.2 Financial Aid.

Attending any college requires the ability to pay for the educational experience. The ability to provide or access necessary financial resources is an important part of the decision to persist. Institutions provide assistance to students through financial aid processes. The availability of sufficient financial aid allowed students from financially insecure backgrounds to attend (Bean, 1990). Finding and accessing financial aid can be a daunting and confusing experience. Institutions should provide orientation and information mechanisms to help community college students navigate the financial aid process (Cummins, 2014). Financial aid mitigates the expense of college, even when the aid may not cover the whole cost of attendance (Calcagno et al., 2008). This mitigating impact allows students from a variety of economic situations to be able to continue

attending the institution. Calcagno et al. (2008) point out that for community colleges, the cost to attend is not as influential a contributor to persistence as it is for four-year institutions.

2.2.2.3 Course scheduling.

An institution's scheduling structure and availability of relevant courses can impact the persistence decision. Community college students have a variety of educational goals and adult students often have competing obligations that affect their availability to attend classes. The availability of relevant and applicable courses to a student's education goal contributes to the decision to stay at an institution, as it directly impacts the ability of the student to meet his or her educational goals (Bean, 1990). Simply put, the student will be more likely to persist at the institution if the available courses help the student progress to their educational goal. In addition to availability, scheduling opportunities are also important in persistence. Capps (2010) recommended that scheduling of courses should consider and make accommodations for the lifestyles of adult students, who are often balancing work and family responsibilities as well. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) also emphasize the need for institutions to be cognizant of the specific learning needs of adult students. Often this means evening or weekend hours.

2.2.2.4 Student Support Programs.

A preponderance of the available studies related to the persistence of community college students focuses on the academic support systems and curricular mechanisms that are available. Barnett (2010) examined how faculty validation experiences affected the persistence of students in urban community colleges. Cummins (2014) investigated strategies to help adult students complete their educational goal at community colleges. Multiple recent studies have examined

the success and persistence of adult students enrolled in developmental education courses (Bahr, 2008; Capps, 2010; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Pruett & Absher, 2015; Wolfle, 2012).

However, the impact of student support programs on the persistence of adult students is a concept that has not been the focus of many studies. Many of the persistence and retention models that can be applied to community college students do not address student support programs directly. These models address concepts related to direct academic support, classroom and curriculum structures, developmental education courses, and student success courses. These mechanisms are often mandatory in nature and result in academic credit or further academic progress.

For the purpose of this literature review, student support programs are defined as those programs that may supplement but are not part of the academic curriculum, are predominantly voluntary in nature, and are generally presented and managed by student affairs professionals. Examples of these programs include tutoring services, social programs, career service programs, and leadership programs. This distinction narrows the available literature significantly. Most studies related to persistence and student support programs through the community college lens have focused on developmental education courses, student success courses, and learning assistance centers. Developmental and student success courses are excluded from this discussion of student support structures for two reasons. One, they have been included as part of the discussion about institutional factors. Second, this study did not examine those types of programs, and was better informed by not considering these two program types as student support programs.

2.2.2.3 Learning assistance centers.

Learning assistance centers (LACs) are formal structures where students can go to receive direct help with multiple academic topics, including tutoring in various content areas, study skills,

test preparation, writing assistance, and other academic assistance (Wurtz, 2015). Referencing back to the definition of student support programs, students choose to engage with LACs. This presents one of the main challenges related to LACs and student support programs in general: students who need the assistance do not always visit the LAC and take advantage of the support (Wurtz, 2015). Keeping this in mind, Higbee, Arendale, & Lundell (2005) emphasize the need to include qualitative data from students in any assessment of LACs and similar programs.

In addition to the academic assistance provided to students, which helps them persist from an academic success perspective, LACs provide students the opportunity to interact and engage with other students. LACs often employ peer tutors and peer assistants, increasing the opportunity for students to engage with one another. Peer instruction and tutoring is an effective student learning tool (Lundberg, 2015). Utilizing LACs contributes positively to persistence, due to both the academic assistance and engagement opportunity (Wurtz, 2015). Wurtz also suggests that engagement with a LAC has a stronger impact on persistence than prior academic skill and motivation.

2.2.2.5 Programs for academic and intellectual development.

Placement into developmental courses provided adult students with requisite skills needed to be successful in future classes (Capps, 2010). However, just as important, the classes also introduced the adult students to the college mindset in a more intentional way than college-ready classes might have. Capps also recommended that developmental classes should be paired with college level classes to create learning communities. This connection encourages adult students to create relationships with students already integrating into the college community. Learning communities provide an opportunity for more intentional student and faculty interactions, which can positively impact persistence (Cummins, 2014).

Students who succeed in developmental classes position themselves to continue into later courses and attain degrees at similar rates to students who didn't take developmental courses (Bahr, 2008). Conversely, students who don't succeed in developmental classes tend to have more negative persistence rates. Bahr (2008) points out that while this is a positive concept, it is troubling at the same time as more students do not remediate successfully than those who do.

2.2.2.4 Learning Communities.

Learning communities are one way in which community colleges have attempted to provide academic environments that are conducive to adult students' learning needs. This consideration that adult students may have different needs than traditional students is important to provide a productive learning environment, which contributes to continued success and persistence (Cummins, 2014). Examining the intersection of several adult learning theories, Kenner and Weinerman described methods that institutions can employ to meet adult student learning needs, including connecting course content to practical implementations in future jobs, intentionally using methods that engage adult students, and the repetition of content to assist in mastery. These methods assist in a similar manner as the developmental education factors discussed earlier (Capps, 2010).

2.2.2.5 Student success courses.

Claybrooks and Taylor (2016) examined another academic offering that many institutions offer for new students, the student success course. Similar to developmental courses, student success courses are designed to introduce any student to the college environment and provide requisite study and time management skills to be able to navigate the college experience. Claybrooks and Taylor examined the persistence between a control group of students who did not

complete a student success course and an experiment group who did complete a student success course. Students at this institution were all required to complete the student success course unless they had taken and passed a similar course at another institution, entered the institution with another degree already attained, or were enrolled in a non-degree program. While their findings did not reveal any significant difference in the persistence rates between the two samples, this study does present another possible institutional factor to consider in the problem of practice.

2.2.3 Institutional integrity

Another influencing factor to the student's decision to persist is the student's perception of the institution's integrity. Braxton et al. (2014) describe a "buzzing confusion" that results from the commuter student's focus on class attendance and degree requirements and attention to non-academic obligations. Order results from the student adhering to the class schedule while on campus. The institution's integrity is evidenced in part through the policies the institution has in place which support the mission of the institutions and the employee actions that exhibit commitment to the institution's mission (Braxton et al., 2014). This integrity is evident to the student to the student by faculty interactions and appropriate institutional policies which support the academic goals of the student.

2.2.3.1 Faculty type and relationships with students.

The makeup of the faculty at an institution also appears to play a role in persistence. Institutions where more classes are taught by full-time instructors as opposed to adjunct faculty seem to support student persistence more positively (Calcagno et al., 2008). Frequent faculty and student interactions support student learning (Lundberg, 2014). Datray, Saxon, and Martirosyan

(2014) found similar results, and suggest several reasons why this may be. Adjunct faculty members often do not receive the same ongoing professional development as full-time faculty. Adjunct faculty members may not have a dedicated space on campus, or allowance for office hours. This contributes to the inability of students to connect with adjunct faculty for support and supplemental instruction as easily as is possible with full-time faculty.

The relationship between a faculty member and the student is an important institutional factor. While not something that the institution can directly create, the institution can create expectations and structures that facilitate the creation of these relationships. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that relationship of adult students with classroom faculty was a powerful contributor to satisfaction with the academic experience. While this study did not specifically include community college students, it did include adult students. Barnett (2010) studied the impact of faculty validation on student persistence. When students felt validated, this positively influenced their integration into the college community, which was positively related to the student's intent to persist.

2.2.3.2 Policies.

Another factor that influences the student's interaction and relationship with the institution is the rules and procedures that govern the student experience. Rules and policies outline the behavioral and professional standards of the institution. Rules and procedures can contribute to the feeling of fitting in for a student. When the student engages in these rules in a positive way and doesn't experience negative interactions with authorities, then the attitude of the student toward the institution increases.

2.2.4 Differing impact on the persistence decision

This discussion of individual factors and organizational characteristics raises the question of which is more impactful to the persistence decision? Calcagno et al. (2008) suggests several reasons why institutional factors may be less impactful to persistence than individual factors. Individual characteristics are easier to measure with greater accuracy. Organizational characteristics have been studied pulling information from IPEDS and similar data sources. The definitions of these characteristics in these sources do not accurately capture the subtleties between institutional policies and practices. Individual characteristics are reported directly by the student and can be examined with regard to that specific student, whereas institutional factors are more difficult to connect directly to an individual student and may be more easily generalized to the broader student population.

2.3 Connection to Study

This study endeavored to understand which individual factors or organizational characteristics at Tri-County are represented in student support structures and programs, ultimately recommending refinements to existing programs or the creation of new programs. The literature review exposed a deficit in current studies related to how non-academic support structures and programs contribute to encouraging adult community college student persistence. This gap is important to note, as this study was specifically concerned with these non-academic support structures and programs in the local context at Tri-County. The findings related to LACS were encouraging. As the organization of student support structures and programs is similar, it is

reasonable to assume that similar relationships may exist between student support structures and programs and persistence. This study identifies some of those relationships from the perspective on adult students at a community college. The findings of this study provide more insight into this relationship.

3.0 Methods

The theoretical framework for this study positioned the persistence decision of the adult student at the intersection of factors that directly inform the decision (Braxton et al., 2014) with factors that influence the decision process of adult students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). This study examined the application of the theoretical framework in the local context of adult students at Tri-County, with the end goal to provide recommendations for the refinement of existing programs or the creation of new programs. These programs need to adequately address any existing gaps in current student support structures and programs for adult programs.

3.1 Study Design and Inquiry Questions

A needs assessment study serves to provide a practical tool that organizations can use to guide future services. Royse, Staton-Tindall, Badger, and Webster (2009) articulate the purpose of a needs assessment as “to obtain an understanding of the extent of the service gaps found in the community being examined” (p. 14). Sleezer, Russ-Eft, and Gupta (2014) indicate that needs assessments provide a framework for determining how to address such a gap and can be appropriately applied to working with future opportunities. As the desired outcome of this study was to identify such a gap and recommend possible solutions, a needs assessment was chosen as the research design.

Needs assessments facilitate the development of programs by identifying the existing needs in a community. Needs assessments are applicable to both small scale studies, such as identifying

the training needs for a single department, or to larger scale investigations, such as identifying a city's housing needs (Royse, Badger, Staton-Tindall, & Webster, 2009). The term "need" has several definitions.

Bradshaw (1977) identified four types of need: normative, felt, expressed, and comparative. Normative need is defined by a standard determined by experts in a specific area, such as daily nutritional need. Expressed need is determined by the review of requests for service. Felt need is determined by asking clients directly what they believe they need. Comparative need is determined by using known characteristics from existing clients to identify other individuals with similar characteristics in the population to determine the overall need of the community.

It is important that the type of need is clear as the need type guides the inquiry method, using needs assessment as the supporting design framework of that method. Using Bradshaw's typology described above, this study attempted to identify the felt need of adult students at Tri-County. By definition, felt need is influenced by each individual's perception of the need (Bradshaw, 1977). Situating this study with qualitative methods provided me the opportunity to examine this felt need as perceived by a variety of individuals.

3.1.1 Inquiry Questions

The following inquiry questions guided this study. These questions provided the framework for research protocol's questions and informed the data analysis scheme.

1. What organizational characteristics influence the decision of an adult student to remain enrolled at Tri-County?
2. What individual factors influence the decision of an adult student to remain enrolled at Tri-County?

3. How do existing support structures and programs impact the decision of an adult student to remain enrolled at Tri-County?
4. What individual factors and organizational characteristics are under-represented or not addressed in existing student support structures and programs at Tri-County?

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Approach

This study used qualitative methods to explore the inquiry questions. Through the research process, I sought to understand how current support structures influenced the decisions of adult students to persist in their educational goals. This understanding informed the analysis process and identification of the existent gaps in these structures and the subsequent identification of possible new structures. The data collection instrument was focus groups. Analysis of the resulting data employed qualitative techniques. The following section provides more detail about the focus group implementation.

3.2.2 Instrument: Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

While there is a myriad of data collection methods available, focus groups were appropriate instruments to collect data to explore the inquiry questions. As discussed subsequently, individual interviews were used as a supplemental data collection method. Not only do focus groups collect sufficient data to address the inquiry questions, the methods are conducive to the participant

population. Tri-County currently uses focus groups, among other methods, to seek feedback from students. As such, their use in this study should be familiar to the potential study population.

Royse, Badger, Staton-Tindall, and Webster (2009) identify several key factors to consider when selecting the study design and instrument for a needs assessment study, including nature of the problem, data availability, financial resources, time, and study purpose. Using focus groups as the instrument in this study addresses these factors positively in the context of the research setting and study purpose. Focus groups provide the ability to connect with participants in such a way as to observe their interactions as well as collect answers to the focus group protocol. The factors that influence adult students' persistence decisions can be very individual to the student, suggesting that the data collection needs to be done in such a way as to engage with the students directly. Conducting focus groups at Tri-County provides a readily available data sample. The required time commitment and financial resources to conduct the focus groups are also conducive to the researcher's time and available resources.

The focus groups collected information about the inquiry questions organized around the following constructs:

1. Organizational characteristics that influence the persistence decision
2. Individual factors that include the persistence decision
3. Impact of these factors on the persistence decision

Focus groups are excellent tools to explore perceptions and thinking and provide information that can guide program and policy development (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Mertens (2015) indicates that focus groups are appropriate when the researcher is interested in how participants develop a certain perspective or schema. This study's inquiry questions, particularly 1-3, are intended to do just that, to identify influencing factors and to determine how these factors

influence decision-making. Focus groups provided participants the opportunity to articulate this information in an open-ended format.

The focus group data provided information to examine inquiry questions 1, 2 and 3. Please see Appendix C for the complete focus group protocol. Inquiry question 4 was examined through the data analysis process. The focus group information, once coded, helped to determine the gap between student needs and what existing support structures and programs address. The findings related to inquiry question 4 fulfill the underlying purpose of this needs assessment. The data analysis process is discussed at greater length in a later section.

3.3 Research Setting

The study was completed at Tri-County Technical College. Situating the study at Tri-County provided both the availability of individuals who meet the sampling frame (described in the “Sample” section) and concretized the practical applicability of the findings to benefit Tri-County. The student population at Tri-County at the time of the study included students situated in different life stages and with different educational goals, representing a diverse collection of students including veterans, first-generation college students, legacy students, students returning mid-career, students looking to transfer to another educational institution, and students with educational goals that will be fulfilled at Tri-County. This list is not exhaustive of the different categorizations that exist.

Student enrollment at Tri-County is 6234 students, with 1050 (17%) students over the age of 24 (Tri-County Technical College, Fall 2018, report 009). To get a more accurate picture of the number of adult students, the number of high school dual enrollment students (884) and Bridge to

Clemson students (854) were excluded. By the age-restricted nature of the programs, dual enrollment and Bridge to Clemson are two specific academic programs that do not include adult students. Excluding these two programs, adult students make up 23% of the student population at Tri-County (Tri-County Technical College, Fall 2018, report 043). This percentage represented a significant portion of students who stand to benefit from improved student support structures. Adult students were eligible to enroll in programs in each of the academic divisions (Arts and Sciences, Health Education, Business and Public Services, and Engineering and Industrial Technology) as well as developmental classes in the College Transitions division.

Tri-County, as the research setting, provided a readily accessible cohort of adult students as participants. Tri-County predicts that in the next decade, the adult student population will increase, as the expected number of traditional-aged college students is expected to diminish in South Carolina during the same timeframe. To continue to fulfill its mission to its three-county service area, Tri-County will need to work towards recruiting and retaining adult students. The setting also contributed to a natural connection for the student to the context of the study because the student participants were currently enrolled and engaged in the educational process.

3.4 Data Sources

Data was collected through focus groups and individual interviews. The desired sample size was 30 participants. To keep the focus group implementation manageable, the ideal size of each focus group was no larger than 6 participants and met recommendations to keep group sizes to 10 or less (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This smaller group size was also intended to assist in the management of group dynamics. The focus groups were held in a conducive setting, with

refreshments provided to help participants feel comfortable with the setting. I began each focus group by discussing the purpose of the study. At that time, I clarified my role as a doctoral student first and Dean of Student Development second. Students were encouraged to share candidly, even if that meant talking to me about potentially negative information about Tri-County. The format of the focus group was presented to participants. Participants were provided a consent form to participate and reminded that the session was to be recorded. For data collection purposes, the focus groups were audio recorded to aid in the transcription and attribution of comments to the correct participant. I facilitated each focus group. At the completion of the facilitation, I thanked participants for their participation and re-emphasized the confidentiality of their responses. Participants did not receive monetary compensation for their participation.

Each focus group used an identical protocol (available in appendix D), created with the following considerations in mind. Krueger and Casey (2015) indicate that the questions used should be formed and sequenced carefully prior to the conducting of the focus group. The literature review identified the individual factors and organizational characteristics identified in current literature and research. The focus group questions were designed to solicit information about these factors. The focus group questions were not leading and instead asked students to identify those things that were either challenging or supporting their ability to remain engaged in their academic work. The protocol also included questions that collected information about the participant's use and perception of the helpfulness of existing support structures and programs.

3.5 Sample

Non-traditional students are described in a variety of ways. The term “nontraditional” can include students who are adults, parents, first-generation college students, students who work full-time, students with disabilities, and other descriptors. As previously stated, this study defined nontraditional students in the context of age: students who are 24 years of age or older. This is a simplistic definition, but one that is constrained by the available information about each student at Tri-County. Of all the possible descriptors included in the definition of nontraditional, age is the only descriptor collected about every enrolled student at Tri-County. The other descriptors are voluntary information that not every student provides. By using age as the defining characteristic of what constitutes a nontraditional student, this allowed for a consistent foundation for the sampling frame.

The sampling frame included all students at Tri-County who were 24 years of age or older. I worked with the Institutional Research and Evaluation department at Tri-County to identify the population of currently enrolled adult students at the start of the spring 2019 term. As described before, the student population at Tri-County is approximately 6200 students, with 1050 of those students meeting the study’s definition of adult students. After consulting with the Director of Institutional Research and Evaluation at Tri-County, it was determined that starting with the overall population was needed to yield an appropriate response rate.

3.5.1 Recruitment

Recruitment occurred in two rounds. In the first round, an invitation was emailed to the study population, describing the study’s purpose and method. The email text is included in

appendix A. Students were not obligated to respond, and participation was completely voluntary. Students who did not wish to participate did not need to take any action. Those students who wished to participate were directed to complete a short online form. This online form provided the opportunity for students to confirm their intent to participate and identify their availability for the study.

I sent the email invitation to the potential focus group participants. As described above, each invitation included a link to an online form to collect participant interest and scheduling considerations. Participants did not sign a formal consent form but were notified immediately prior to the facilitation of the focus group that their participation would signify consent. Participants who reported to the focus group location, but who declined to participate could have simply left, however no participant chose to leave.

The final sample was identified through a selection of participants who responded to the online form indicating positive interest in participating in the focus group. Seventy-eight students responded to the initial invitation and indicated interest in participating in a focus group. Follow-up emails were sent to each of these 78 students with focus group times. Focus group invitations were structured so that each focus group would consist of students from the same academic division.

The online interest form collected availability information for each student. The intent behind collecting this information was to identify focus group meeting times, but this proved difficult to do. The complexity of trying to select a few times that would be conducive for most participants led to a change in the scheduling process. In the end, I selected 8 focus group times, 2 for each division. A follow-up email was sent to participants notifying them of the identified

times for their division focus groups. Participants were asked to RSVP for one time. Through this process 19 students participated in a focus group and in individual interviews.

To increase the sample size, I conducted a second round of recruitment which included sending invitations to the original population inviting participation in additional focus groups, visiting classes to recruit face to face, and connecting with academic division deans and department heads to identify more participants. During the class visits, students were provided with information about the study and directions about how to contact me if interested in participating. Students who responded through this second round of recruitment did not complete the online interest form. The resulting students who volunteered to participate in this second round increased the sample size to 19. Table 1 provides the distribution of the final sample population by division. Table 2 describes information about participants age. The median age of participants was 37 years old.

Table 1 Distribution of Participants by Division

Division	Email Recruitment	In-person Recruitment	Total Participants
Arts and Sciences	1	1	2
Business and Public Services	4	1	5
Engineering and Industrial Technology	4	2	6
Health Education	6	0	6
Overall	15	4	19

Table 2 Distribution of Participants by Age

Age Range (in years)	Number of Participants
25-30	5
31-35	4
36-40	4
41-45	1
46-50	3
51-55	0
56-60	2

The data collection method changed slightly for the second round of participants. Due to logistical and scheduling concerns, these students were interviewed individually using the same question protocol as the focus groups in the first round. Overall, the level of richness of content was consistent between both rounds of participants.

To maintain a manageable group dynamic and allow for participants to adequately respond to the questions, the groups were limited 5-6 participants each. In practice, the focus groups in round 1 included 2-4 participants. The composition of the focus group should be such that it includes participants with a unifying characteristic, but that has sufficient variation to collect differing response and opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). As such, focus groups were organized to include students from the same division. Originally, the descriptive information collected through the online interest form was intended to be used to help ensure a sample of adult students that also reflects the overall demographic snapshot of the Tri-County student population. However, given the smaller than intended response to the focus group invitations, this information was not used as such. Each division had two focus groups in round 1, with several individual interviews in round 2. Separating focus groups by division helped ensure that the students had a common characteristic, as well as highlighted similarities and differences among students who are working within similar academic structures.

3.5.2 Focus Group Setting

Focus groups were held in the Student Success Center on the Pendleton Campus of Tri-County in a conference room. This conference room provided a comfortable setting, but also allowed for minimal interruptions and distractions to focus group participants. Light refreshments were provided to help set participants at ease and contribute to a comfortable atmosphere.

3.6 Data Analysis

Krueger and Casey (2015) discuss the differences in the analysis of focus groups as compared to other qualitative instruments. The focus group shares characteristics with a discussion or conversation, where other qualitative instruments (such as interviews and open-ended survey questions) may present a more organized response. Other qualitative methods are often individual-focused. Responses from focus group participants are influenced by the interaction of the focus group participants. This requires me to be careful in the analysis to consider the interactive influence on the response. For example, is a participant repeating a comment because it is important to them, or because they feel that other participants are not acknowledging the comment? I considered these cautions carefully as the analysis was completed.

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Audio data and transcriptions were stored in Box and accessible only to me. Analysis of the data was facilitated by the use of Dedoose online software. Dedoose was chosen for its applicability to qualitative analysis techniques, and its relatively simple learning curve. Throughout the analysis, the investigator identified themes which emerged and were related to the use of student support structures and the intersection of this usage with the identified individual factors and organizational characteristics. I used these themes to develop a coding structure for qualitative analysis. The coding structure allowed me to identify the support systems, challenges, perceived difference between adult and traditional students, and to suggest support structures that resulted from the focus groups and interviews.

Each focus group was transcribed and entered into Dedoose as soon as possible after completion. An initial review was completed, with an overall review after all transcriptions were entered. These initial examinations of response were guided by the following guiding questions: *What were the major themes? What information was surprising or unexpected? What recurring*

points of information exist? What quotes were especially detailed? What was the interaction of the group like? Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest that focus group analysis should be continual and ongoing. They suggest reviewing data and responses after each individual focus group to inform the data collection at the next focus group. The only minor change to the protocol was to include several of the questions as corporate questions as opposed to asking each one individually and waiting for responses. This was done as participants were tending to answer the subsequent questions as they went. This slight change improved the overall flow of the conversation in both the focus groups and the interviews.

After the completion of all focus groups and interviews, the following additional questions were considered: *What differences exist between the focus groups? How were responses different?* These were in addition to reviewing all data through the lens of the original guiding questions. The final coding structure emerged from the analysis of the answers to these questions. Use of Dedoose online qualitative software, leveraging its data organization and search features, assisted greatly in the review of this information, providing an efficient method to identify recurring words, phrases, and concepts.

The answers to these questions provided the basis for an initial coding structure. This coding structure organized responses by identifying patterns and connections. The purpose of the study should direct and guide the analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The inquiry questions sought to identify what factors influenced the participants persistence decision. The goal of this study was to provide recommendations to improve existing or introduce new support structures. As such, attention was paid to those responses and content which related back to the use and effectiveness of these structures. Information about individual and organizational characteristics was also important, as these factors will ultimately drive the content and purpose of the support

structures. The coding structure allowed me to organize participant responses to be able to address the inquiry questions.

Inquiry questions 1 and 2 explored the identification of individual factors and organizational characteristics. As focus group responses were reviewed, the research paid attention to language and wording that indicated items that could be identified as factors. The list of factors identified through the literature review was used as a starting place in this identification. The research was open to the identification of additional factors not already identified in current literature. However, the factors identified through this analysis were included in those factors outlined previously in the literature review. These factors are discussed in chapter 4.

Inquiry question 3 explored the perception of whether the support structures and programs available at Tri-County addressed these identified factors. As responses were coded in the context of factors, I looked for information in the responses that indicated any connection between those factors and the decision to persist, whether that connection was explicit or implied. The study's theoretical framework provided a lens through which these connections are examined. Participants talked about how the support structures at Tri-County were helpful to them, identifying the situations that these structures helped with. The manner in which participants engaged with those support structures also surfaced through the conversations, including why they went to the support structure, how they were referred to the structure, and whether the structure was able to help them or not. The support structures that were discussed were generally positive. No participant described a support structure that they found completely unhelpful.

Inquiry question 4, explored under-represented factors in student support structures and programs. This question had the potential to not be addressed directly in participant responses. There was one protocol question which asked what the participant thought was missing or what

Tri-County could do better. In addition to the answers to this question, the outcomes associated with this inquiry question also came from an analysis of the resulting factors identified in response to questions 1, 2 and 3. This comparison identified a roster of suggested support structures and programs that participants indicated would be helpful. I considered these suggestions through the lens of the theoretical framework and the finds from the research questions to identify the recommendations for program changes or the identification of new programs, which is an appropriate use of the needs assessment as a study design.

The needs assessment design is intended to identify the difference between the factors that are influencing the persistence decision of adult students and the support these students are receiving through existing programs. This difference defined the existing gap between the needs of adult students and existing services. Particular attention was paid to the information that participants shared that talk about specific factors that influenced their decision to persist at Tri-County. Additionally, the responses were coded and analyzed to identify the individual and organizational characteristics which influenced the participant's decision to engage with these support structures. As these factors and characteristics were considered in the formulation of recommendations, they were considered through the lens of existing theoretical frameworks and models (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & Mclendon, 2014). The recommendations for new support structures addressed the identified gap.

3.7 Reflexivity

3.7.1 Researcher Role

I am fully immersed in the practical application of this study. Serving as the Dean of Student Development at Tri-County, I am deeply involved in the coordination and delivery of student support structures. Recognizing the potential for appropriately situated and need-responsive structures, I am positioned to utilize the results of this study to impact the inventory of support structures available. While the student development department does not implement every student support structure at Tri-County, department employees are often part of the development or implementation of support structures, including those that are owned by other departments and operations. By identifying which factors influence the persistence of adult students, Student Development can coordinate and create programs designed to support students who exhibit these factors. While the purpose of the study is to make recommendations of program changes for adult students, the programs can also benefit other student populations.

Prior research has identified influences related to organizational characteristics and individual factors related to student retention, such as institution size, tuition level, adjunct faculty use, expenditures per student, degree offerings, financial aid, course offerings, prior academic preparation, educational goals, previous academic achievement, college preparatory experiences, family background, prior school experience, educational goals and intentions (Barnett, 2010; Bean, 1990; Bremer, Center, Opsal, Medhanie, Jang, & Geise, 2013; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gillman, 2016; Tinto, 1993). This problem of practice looked to narrow the identification of these factors to the population of students at Tri-County, with the hope that any results are generalizable to the SCTCS population of adult students.

3.7.2 Reciprocity

The resulting recommendations from this study are intended to directly inform the development and refinement of student support structures for adult students at Tri-County. While the recommendations are specific to the support structures coordinated by my department, Student Development, the interconnected and collaborative nature of the operations of Tri-County creates an environment where these findings are applicable to many Tri-County departments and operations. The findings and recommendations from this study were shared with Tri-County in an open presentation before the Academic Leadership Team, which is comprised of administrators and directors from both the Academic Affairs and Student Support and Engagement divisions. The format of this presentation was similar to a conference presentation and included a time for questions.

3.8 Researcher's Epistemology

This study was situated within the constructivist paradigm. As participants responded to the same questions, as expected, their personal context and experiences inserted themselves in the responses. While many responses were similar, there were unique information points as well. The constructivist paradigm recognizes that reality is different for each person and reinforced by individual experiences (Mertens, 2015). It is this difference in experiences that was most important to the ultimate purpose of the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) define the constructivist approach as “understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (p.24). As adult progress through their college experience, the need for support is different in each

of them. The need and desire to develop responsive and relevant support structures has to respond to the reality that adult students are creating. All of these experiences, whether shared or unique, provided a rich look at adult student experience and influenced the ultimate recommendations.

Constructivism requires a personal and interactive mode of data collection (Mertens, 2015). This compatibility with interactivity is influential to the choice of focus groups as a data collection instrument. Focus groups are designed to understand and provide insights of the shared experience of the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This purpose meshes well with the constructivist view and is positively aligned with this study. Support structures need to support the actual need and experience, as defined by the student, not any needs pre-determined by administrators or staff members who may not adequately understand the actual needs and experiences.

There are many different life situations and preparatory experiences that adult students experienced, which contribute to their support needs. Some adult students had families whose needs were prioritized over the student's academic pursuit. Other adult students had a family structure that didn't present as many demands. Students had differing levels of academic skills and preparation. Some students needed developmental and remedial courses, while others didn't. These are only two examples. It was this willingness to allow the findings to organically guide the analysis that aligned well with the constructivist paradigm.

3.9 Limitations

As with any study, this study had several limitations. The definition of nontraditional students as defined for this study considered only age. While this definition is confined by the nature of the starting information available about potential participants (as discussed earlier), the

sample may not be representative of all nontraditional students at Tri-County. There may be students who would fit a broader definition of “nontraditional,” but are younger than 24 years old. There are certainly younger students who have similar competing commitments and life situations which are similar to the adult students studied. Their inclusion in the study may have provided a more representative sample.

I assumed that the current support structures for adult students are not adequately meeting their needs. Overall, the research showed a positive impression of the support structures at Tri-County and recognized that adult students do not connect with those structures at the same rate as traditional students. This may have introduced an assumption bias into the analytical process.

The study design involved two active pieces: responding to the online interest form and participating in the focus group or interview. The perceived time commitment might have discouraged some participants from participating in both these activities. The participants who did engage in both may have been individuals who are more intrinsically motivated to do whatever is needed to be successful. This might have potentially skewed the findings such that the ultimate recommendations may not address all influential factors related to the decision to persist. The overall sample population was smaller than intended. It’s possible that the sample size did not provide sufficient response for the results to be generalizable to the overall adult student population at Tri-County.

An effort was made to include all four academic divisions at the College. However, there was less response from the Arts and Sciences division than the others. Only two students responded from the Arts and Sciences division. As such, the results of this study may not be as applicable to students in that division as they may be to the divisions who were more strongly represented.

4.0 Findings

Unsurprisingly, many of the descriptions of adult students and how they engage in college held true for adult students at Tri-County. Through the conversations with adult students, they talked about many of the same challenges identified in current literature. At the same time, they provided direct information about how they are navigating those challenges through support systems, what motivates them, how they spend their time on campus, and their perceived differences between them and traditional students. The acknowledgement that participating in a college education as an adult student has challenges was evident throughout the conversations with these students. For most of them, they recognized the commitment needed to be successful. It is interesting to note that while the direction of the study related to exploring how non-academic support structures assisted students, the most common support was a relationship with a faculty member which is not a formal support structure.

4.1 Perception of Differences Between Traditional and Adult Students

Participants were not specifically asked what they considered to be the differences between adult and traditional students, or how they perceived traditional students. However, this topic wove itself into the narrative in most conversations. While not an anticipated data point, this articulation of how adult students view the difference between themselves and traditional students illustrates the context in which adult students make decisions. This context provides a backdrop within which to consider how and why adult students choose to engage in support structures. The

research questions consider how and why adult students decide to remain enrolled. Understanding the context in which they make this decision, and what support structures they are using to support their continued enrollment, is important in the creation of recommendations for how Tri-County can support the persistence of adult students. Understanding the perceived differences between adult and nontraditional students can position Tri-County to most effectively structure their support structures for adult students. Some support structures may be positioned to more appropriately support traditional students, while others may more appropriately support adult students.

Participant's approach to this topic presented a mixed message. Some students viewed a stark division between themselves and traditional students. Others valued the melting pot experience of having different ages together in the same classroom. As one considers the following perceptions, it's important to value them for how they impact the adult student's engagement in the learning environment. At the same time, one needs to acknowledge that they are generalizations being applied to individual students.

Participants expressed strong dedication to their goal. At the same time, the confidence level did not always match this level of dedication. Some participants described feeling less smart or less academically prepared. As Janice (Business and Public Services student) describes it: "I feel like I'm not on their level as far as smartness or intellectual level." Adult students felt that they had to work harder to learn the same material. Changes due to aging were talked about as reasons why memory wasn't as good as younger students. Younger students just seem to be able to learn things faster. This perception of having to work hard to reach the same goal led to an expression of lessened academic confidence.

At the same time, students saw their age and experience as a benefit. Life experience has taught the adult student how to prioritize and manage their time more efficiently. Elaine (Health Education student) said “I think on some level being older has been a benefit. . . Because your priorities are different. . . [Y]ou know better time management, you know how to prioritize things.” They described themselves as more mature, able to communicate better with instructor that were closer to their own age, a shared respect. When discussing the difference in maturity, it was apparent that the adult students were taken aback by the level of disrespect some traditional students showed to instructors. This was a distraction to many of the adult students, which conflicted with their desire to use their time as efficiently as possible. These students don’t want to deal with situations where they are wasting their time with actions they view as time-wasting and distracting.

Being an older student, it's hard because the maturity levels different also.

You can't be in a study group with a lot of them [traditional students] because they want to bash the teachers and your past that. That's childish. (Jill, Health Education student)

Traditional students were not described as having the same level of dedication. Several students talked about how it seemed to be difficult for traditional students to get to class on time, especially for those classes first thing in the morning. The same adult students took pride in the fact that they hadn’t missed any classes. This confidence in their level of maturity also came across through their descriptions of their willingness to interact with instructors on a more peer level. They were more willing to be persistent when working with an instructor to reach a goal, whether short or long term. One participant described his need to make multiple attempts to obtain a syllabus from the instructor.

I've asked multiple times for a syllabus. Younger students . . . they just kind of take it or they get frustrated and yell and scream and they just quit. Whereas an older student, you're like "Okay. Great. I understand. I'll make do because I've learned that skill." (Tom, Arts and Sciences student)

Traditional students were seen to be more adept at using technology in the learning environment, but don't seem to recognize the advantage this puts them at over adult students. For the adult student, it was as much work to learn how to use the technology and navigate the learning management system as it was to learn the course material. This didn't always come easy. This was seen as detrimental to the adult student as instructors didn't seem to always acknowledge this advantage, causing adult students to have to work harder. One student described a challenge with formatting a paper in the required style but was unfamiliar with how to use the software to do so.

I kept going to him asking him [instructor] you know, to explain it to me or direct me to a classmate that could show me how to do it. And all he kept telling me was go to the Tutoring Center. I went three times they didn't help me any as far as that. I finally found a student . . . she was a computer major. [. . .] I said "Look, can you take the show me how to do this?" I gave her an example. I said take this sentence and show me how to put it in that format. Then what am I supposed to have? Am I supposed to have a cover page or not have a cover page? (Janice, Business and Public Services student)

Traditional students were also seen to be on a different educational path. The adult students whose goals were to support their families and find better jobs saw the traditional student as someone on the path to more education. They acknowledged that many of the traditional students

were looking to go onto a four-year institution in order to join a specific career. The adult students were more focused on getting a job within a short period of time. At the same time, there were adult students who acknowledged the need for themselves to continue on to a four-year institution to meet their needs. However, the overall perception was that traditional students had the ability, due to lack of competing commitments, to spend more time on their education and take time to figure their lives out. In contrast, the adult students felt that they had already done that. One student close to retirement age acknowledged that difference:

And if you're an adult student in that environment, you're a little bit of a fish out of water. Because you're trying to get a job. You know I'm trying to get a job for 10 years and then financially retire. That's my goal. (Richard, Engineering and Industrial technology student.

When considered together, all of these things present a general feeling of the adult students feeling out of place and not connecting with other students. As one student put it:

And then there are some people some I guess, kids that are 21 to 25 that think they know it all or think that "Oh, I ain't talking to that old woman. What is she doing here?" (Jennifer, Business and Public Services student)

Even though 1 in 6 students is an adult student, they don't perceive opportunities to connect with other adult students. The desire to be able to connect more easily with other adult students was commonly expressed. This concept is discussed more fully later in this chapter.

4.2 Motivation

Donaldson and Graham (1999) maintain that the previous experiences of the adult student, along with continuing commitments and ongoing experiences, influences how adult students engage in the academic process. Adult students use their previous experiences, and the results cognitive structures built by those influences, as the lens in which they process the academic environment. Individual motivation is key in why the student chooses to initially engage in formal learning and their decision to continue engaging. Understanding the motivation of adult students is important in answering the research questions in a similar fashion as understanding the perceived differences between adult and traditional students. Motivation is a strong influence on the decision making process of which structures adult students engage and why they engage in them. The underlying factors that influence the student's motivation are factors that need to be included in the support structures for adult students at Tri-County.

Study participants were motivated by a variety of things, both intrinsic and extrinsic. As discussed previously about their perceptions of the differences between adult and traditional students, participants considered themselves more internally motivated and dedicated to being successful. As one student put it, "I know my success is on me . . . I just have to be willing to try. But I think a lot of [adult students who aren't in college] don't realize it, they can do it, too" (Jennifer, Health Education student). Students discussed a personal desire to become a better person or affect the community in a positive way, displayed strong intrinsic motivation. For several students from the Health Education division, specifically in the nursing program, students talked about wanting to help others in need. These students saw their education as a way to be involved in patient lives to make life better for those students.

A student in the criminal justice program, in the business and public services division, described her personal status as a survivor of domestic abuse. For this student, learning how to be a formal advocate and support person for other individuals experience abuse, including children, is a strong motivator for her. The knowledge that she will be able to work within the justice system to help others keeps her focused on the end goal of completing the program.

I'm a victim of domestic violence. My marriage was domestic violence every day . . . [I]f I went to a call or something like that and it was a domestic call, I feel like I could be more understanding and be more helpful. If there were children, I could be more sympathetic. And so, I have asked what you could carry in your patrol cars, as far as like little stuffed animals. If you went on a call like that and say both parents went to jail or one parent went to the hospital and one parent with the jail and the child sitting there crying, could I bring out a stuffed animal and give it to them to comfort them while they're seeing all this horrific, traumatic stuff? (Jennifer, Business and Public Services student)

These examples of intrinsic motivation were frequent in students from the Business and Public Services and Health Education divisions. It's to be expected that these students express a desire to help others. Programs in the Health Education and Business and Public Services divisions include those professions that provide direct physical and emotional support to individuals in need. These students are preparing to be nurses, medical assistants, lab technicians, veterinary technicians, police officers, and social case workers. This is not an inclusive list.

Other students described extrinsic motivation related to how completing their educational goal will help them get a better job, which in turn will help them become more economically stable and earn a salary that will meet their life needs. Many of these students have other individuals

who rely on them for financial support and living needs, such as children and family. Providing for a family was the most common motivator that students described. Being a parent, whether a single parent or with a partner, requires the student to be able to provide for their family to meet their needs, which presents a certain pressure to persist in their respective program to completion. While talking about a time when she had considered leaving college, one participant, who is a parent, said:

And so, I failed the class, and that was devastating. . . . It was so hard, because I had tried so hard. And then you know, I was gonna have to repeat all that work. . . . But when you're an adult, and you're in charge of things, you gotta choose [to be] more responsible. (Jill, Health Education student)

Not every student who participated in the study was a parent or had other individuals who relied upon the student for support. Non-parent students had different reasons for why they decided to continue in their programs. For several students, they were seeking a different job due to a forced job change due to layoffs or relocations. One student described a situation in which he had worked for the same employer for many years and the suddenly the location where he worked was being shut down.

I worked in the engineering department at [local automotive manufacturing plant]. And they decided they wanted to move the plant to Mexico. I was offered a position in Connecticut, but I couldn't see moving up there and taking my daughter away from her school and friends. . . . So, I enrolled into college. I could pick any college to go with, but I prefer the local colleges because you get a more personalized experience. So, I talked with the Career Center on

what would be good to take, and we come up with the major I'm at. (Chris, Engineering and Industrial Technology student

All of the students in the study identified completing a credential as essential to obtaining their desired job. Several students are planning to transfer to four-year institutions and are attending the College to fulfill their general education course requirements. For some students, the education was necessary for licensure in their intended field, evident in those students looking to go into law enforcement or the nursing profession. For other students looking to go into technical industries, the need for technical, mechanical, and skill-specific training was evident. One student talked about this need, in relation to changing professions later in life:

I have a lot of life experience but don't have experience in engineering. My experience is from the mid '80s when I worked for a year and a half with a engineering company. And so, when you don't have experience in your mind that's sort of that's a bit, I think that's a big obstacle to overcome when you're trying to get back into something. (Richard, Engineering and Industrial Technology student)

4.3 How They Spend Their Time on Campus

Participant described their time spent on campus as very focused on being productive, whether for an academic task or for another need. Time as a precious resource that was not to be squandered was evident in many of the conversations. Many students who identified as parents described getting up early, before their children, to manage logistical family issues such as

household chores, getting children ready for school, and then transporting them there. Even those students who were not parents and worked full-time described similar schedules. As such, time spent on academics at home was often early in the morning or late at night. When the student had the opportunity to come to campus and spend time away from home and family commitments, they used that time to study, complete assignments, meet with study groups, and similar academic actions. They did not use such time to engage in campus life. Very few of the students joined student organizations or attended campus events. Not that they did not want to, but they viewed their time as better spent on more directly productive tasks. As one student said, “I'd like to get involved in. It's just the time constraints right now. It's like, just it's not possible” (Chris, Engineering and Industrial Technology student). When they did choose to do such things, it was because it met an academic or career need.

Students, however, would be willing to attend educational workshops on topics like time management or good research practices, as they saw that content as making them a better student. They were also willing to attend campus events, like a career fair, as it had direct connection to getting a job. Janice (Business and Public Services student), described her willingness to attend both career fairs as well as voluntary workshops on time management: “And so then I try to find deeper, I guess, resources where I can get organized. Different ways to study. Different ways to take notes.” The student organizations that they chose to join were those that were either academic organizations directly related to a program, such as the Student Nursing Association or those organizations that were leadership focused. Richard (Engineering and Industrial Technology student) joined the National Society for Leadership and Success (NSLS) and said, “That's been good to network with different students and hear their perspective.” NSLS This focus on leadership

was seen as beneficial to mobility in the career path and perceived as a benefit to be listed on a resume.

4.4 Factors Which Contribute to Continuing Enrollment

4.4.1 Relationships

4.4.1.1 Individual relationships with faculty and staff.

Making a personal connection with a faculty or staff member at the educational institution is a powerful contributor to the success of an adult student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The importance of these connections was a common theme that came out in many of the participant's comments. Participants talked about connecting with an individual instructor for help through an individual course, but also as an ongoing support relationship. This ongoing relationship provided students with a trusted source for information, encouragement, and mentorship.

In most of these relationships described by participants, the student made connection with an instructor, both full-time and adjunct. Not all individuals that students connected with were instructors, some were staff members in different support offices, such as Career and Employability Resources and the Financial Aid office. In these cases, the student expressed that the individual was either willing to take extra time to help the student navigate a process or came across as extremely competent in helping the student find a resolution, or both. The following quote from an Arts and Sciences division student provides a good look into how most of the students described their ability to find at least one instructor who they saw as helpful.

By far, it seems like all of the Tri-County instructors have been accessible and willing to make accommodations not just for me, but I've seen it for other students, where the students or myself could not meet during office hours. And the instructors have worked at around to make it work via Skype, via phone call me, via "I'm going to be grading papers, my office at 4:30 this evening, even though it's not office hours, swing by and I'll answer the questions." So, the biggest thing really support wise has been the instructors and the willingness to bend over backwards. (James, Arts and Sciences student)

One contributor to the trust that students showed toward the adjunct instructors is the adjunct's immersion in the practical field. Most of the adjunct faculty are professionals in their respective field who teach one or more courses. Richard (Engineering and Industrial Technology student) talked about the value he sees in having working professionals as instructors and how they prepare students for what a job will really be like:

You know I'll tell you one thing. We've got a teacher that just came in . . . he's got like a 30-year career as an electrical engineer . . . everything is like really hands on. [He] says "Here's what you're going to need to know." Puts it literally on our desk and says do it. (Richard, Engineering and Industrial technology student)

Participants appreciated those faculty and staff members who recognized that adult students bring more to the classroom and college experience, through their life experiences, than traditional students. This appreciation helped to gain the participant's trust for these employees. Concrete recognitions of adult students success showed support for adult students and provided encouragement accordingly. This could be as simple as positive comments in the classroom, or

more formal. Richard (Engineering and Industrial Technology student, talked about this as he described his surprise and gratification at receiving an achievement award: “[I]t meant a lot to me that they would give me that award. I mean I worked hard. But they also, I think, said ‘Here’s a guy at 58 coming back to school: ‘You know go for it!’”

In addition to concrete recognition that adult students could be as successful as traditional students, providing accommodations for associated challenges was also important to participants. Instructors who were willing to be flexible to fit scheduling challenges were described as supportive and helpful. James (Arts and Sciences student) talked about times when he couldn’t make it to campus to meet with instructors during scheduled office hours: “[T]he instructors have worked to make it work via Skype, via phone call me, via ‘I’m going to be grading papers, my office at 430 this evening, even though it’s not office hours, swing by and I’ll answer the questions.’” This flexibility and the recognition and appreciation of the type of experiences adult students have exhibited commitment to helping the adult student be successful.

As discussed in the next session, participant motivation to persist towards completion of credential is related to economic mobility and often family sustenance. Completing a credential is viewed as the method to obtain a good job to be able to move to a better place economically and be able to support a family. When the student perceives that the instructor can assist in the classroom, and provide direct connections to the relevant field, it seems that the trust is more easily solidified. Having a known and reliable person that the student can connect with alleviates any concerns the student may have about wasting time navigating between multiple offices or individuals to find the information they need. As discussed later, time is a precious resource that these adult students believe they must manage effectively.

While creating relationships with college personnel was important, participants also discussed the desire to connect with other adult students. While 1 in 6 students at Tri-County is an adult student, the perception is that there are not as many adult students. The desire to create connections with other adult students was talked about in about a quarter of the conversations.

4.4.2 Support Systems and Programs

Appropriate motivation is important to students being successful and continuing. As outlined in the theoretical framework, students make a decision to stay at an institution based on the interaction of external environment, the student's perception of institutional commitment, and academic development (Braxton et al., 2014). The student's differing support systems influence this decision in several ways. First, support systems can provide direct assistance in navigating environmental concerns and challenges. Both personal and institutional support systems can provide this assistance. Second, institutional support systems impact the student's perception of the institutional commitment to helping the student succeed.

4.4.2.1 Personal support systems.

Students described their personal support systems as those people in their lives who provide assistance to them to be able to engage in their academic program. Mostly these other individuals are spouses and parents who provide assistance in mitigating competing priorities for the student's academic requirements. However, several participants described receiving family-like support from close friends. This support comes in the form of childcare and financial support. Financial support was evident in several ways. For some students, their personal support system provides direct financial support for tuition and other institutional expenses. For others, the financial

support is more indirect. For example, several students described spouses working full-time to support the family, allowing the student the opportunity to not work and focus on school.

Because fortunately, I do have a fiancé that supports us as a family right now, completely. That's why I was able to, you know, quit my job to focus just on school and also care for my son. (Lauren, Business and Public Services student)

Childcare is an important support mechanism. The large majority of the participants indicated that they were parents. Several described themselves as single parents. As such, the need for childcare was important and was evident in participant responses. Some participants had older children that could be left alone while the student was engaged in classes. Other students had younger children that couldn't. The College does not have a childcare program for students, which requires students to identify solutions for this challenge individually. Family and friends are the main assistance to students in meeting this need. For some students, this means a partner or spouse providing the childcare. For others, the student's parents or friends provide the childcare.

In addition to family and friends as part of the student's personal support system, peers were also described as important members. Keeping in mind the notion that adult students view their time on campus as valuable and use it to be productive, often not making campus engagement a priority, it's not surprising that the peer support and engagement was primarily described as engaging in peer study groups or similar gatherings. Students described using the breaks between classes or other times they are on campus as prime opportunities to meet with other students to complete assignments and study together. As an extension of these peer groups, students also were encouraged by the social connection with other students and viewed peers as an additional vehicle for encouragement. Some participants viewed the social connections they made with other

students as unique. This complements the expressed perception that adult students do not often have the opportunity to connect with other adult students.

The [welding] students support each other like. I feel l like there's a unique camaraderie here that I haven't seen in other academic environments. I'm definitely very unique camaraderie. [Welding Classes] not only foster education they also foster interpersonal skills, and like, you, you can't do it alone. And yes, it's nice to have support from the teachers and stuff. But it's really great just having friends you can reach out to within the welding program that can just offer advice. That you know, they may be made that mistake and they can help you through it. Or, you know, just kind of talk through some things because life isn't always about education and stuff. Sometimes it's just, you got issues in your personal life, and it's good to have just people to reach out to you. (Bill, Welding Student)

4.4.2.2 College support structures and programs.

Adult students deal with some challenges that a personal support group cannot adequately resolve or assist with. The scope of the challenge that is required to address the challenge is more than members of the personal support system are equipped to handle. The nature of these challenges revolved around two themes: concerns about longer-term considerations, such as future career goals and major exploration; and support for an immediate need. It was clear that participants were willing to seek assistance when doing so would address one of these two types of challenges. In these cases, students connected with a college office or support program to provide the necessary assistance.

Students identified the following college operations and programs as providing support to them: Career and Employability Resources, Financial Aid, the Accessibility Resource Center, Wellness Programs, the Tutoring Center, Patriot's Place, student organizations, and the Leading Edge Experience programming. It is important to note, as they were discussed in more detail earlier in the chapter, individual faculty and staff members are not included in the list of institutional support structures and programs and operations. However, they remain important in the consideration of what adult students find helpful, whether that is providing direct services and support outside the classroom or providing flexibility and support as instructors in the classroom.

Not all of these support structures are used as frequently as others. The subsequent discussion highlights those structures that were discussed by students as the most helpful or impactful. Certain support structures were cited more frequently by certain division students as compared to the other division. Overall, the Tutoring Center and Career and Employability Resources were the most often referenced support services, with the Tutoring Center being the most common support structure to be used.

The Tutoring Center provides one-on-one and group tutoring, as well as supplemental instruction. Supplemental instruction is group tutoring for a specific course, where the tutor is embedded in the course and can provide direct assistance relevant to the respective instructor's method and progression of the subject. Tutoring is available for a variety of subjects and courses. Most students discussed seeking assistance in subjects such as English, math, chemistry, and biology, which are commonly required in most of the academic programs. Accessing the Tutoring Center for assistance was cited consistently by students from all the divisions. For adult students, engaging in the academic process may require them to access skills that they may not use often and have less confidence in. Tutoring provides an opportunity for students to interact with a tutor

who can provide direct feedback about their skill utilization and application in the context of the class content. Having this one-on-one feedback seemed to increase the adult student's confidence while allowing them to seek assistance in a safe environment. Speaking about English composition, one student said:

And there's a lot of writing . . . [O]ne thing that I did find very helpful was being able to submit my rough draft say to someone in the Writing Center. [It's] helpful having those kinds of resources. Someone who is more skilled, more knowledgeable about those kinds of requirements that can actually go over what you've done. (Elaine, Health Education)

Career and employability resources assist students by working with students individually for career and employability counseling and through some group workshops. They work with students to determine if the student is in the correct major to meet their career or educational goal. Connecting students with work-based learning opportunities, such as internships and cooperative learning experiences is another way that they help students prepare for the transition to the workforce. They also provide individual resume review and interview preparation so that students can market themselves effectively. As described by study participants, students from the Business and Public Services and Engineering and Industrial Technology divisions utilized Career Services the most. One student in the Engineering and Industrial Technology division talked about why he visited Career Services:

Because I'd like to get into a position of where I can teach. And in a management position, I could still teach. I'll always be a hands-on person. I'm not the office type. But I've also worked in management before in a supervisor

position. So, I thought this would actually help my career and give me more knowledge. (Chris, Engineering and Industrial Technology student)

The Wellness Programs and Financial Aid offices were accessed by students to assist with financial challenges, such as identifying funding sources to remain enrolled, and to address immediate financial needs, such as dealing with life situations that introduce additional financial strain to individuals. Financial Aid helps students as they are entering the college to navigate identifying, applying for, and using various financial aid funding sources, such as grants, scholarships, and loans. This process is complex and is constantly changing. Students described receiving assistance from the Financial Aid office to find sufficient funds to remain at the college. Students from the Engineering and Industrial Technology division cited Financial Aid as a helpful structure more frequently than students from the other divisions. The following student describes how this office was able to help him identify funding through the South Carolina lottery program, which provides money to qualifying students in the form of grants.

So, I mean I'm going to with the help of the lottery, you know, the money. I mean I'm going to get my whole associates degree for somewhere around \$4500. And so, to me that, to get a degree and then to get the experience that I'm getting, I think that's an incredible deal. (Richard, Engineering and Industrial Technology student)

Wellness Programs helps students connect to internal College resources that can assist with life barriers that compete with a student's academic journey, as well as connecting students with a variety of community and state agencies that provide direct support for needs. The internal and external resources provide students with explicit resources to address a need. For example, students who are experiencing food insecurity can be connected to the College's food pantry for

short term needs and to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for long-term assistance. Other students may need additional funds to buy textbooks or supplies and can use available funds to do so through the College's emergency assistance fund. As will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, adult students have competing priorities and commitments. Wellness programs help provide support for students to reduce the impact these needs have on their ability to stay. Students described wellness programs as providing support for food needs, and assistance in purchasing textbooks and supplies. Students from all the divisions, except Arts and Sciences, cited wellness programs as a helpful structure.

I've dealt with the food pantry, which is so amazing . . . There's so many personal outside things people are going through . . . you can get help for gas. They'll help with your power bill. They will help, they will help fill out the application for you to get [what you need]. (Penny, Health Education student)

Institutional integrity affects how students view the institution's commitment to helping them succeed. Students who view the institution as committed to helping them be more successful have a higher view of the institution's integrity, which positively influences their decision to persist (Braxton et al., 2014). It is important that the College provide the support that is advertised to students in an intentional and productive way. The support structures that students identified were talked about in positive ways, with students highlighting how their engagement with the various structures was important to their success in a particular goal, such as assistance with an individual assignment, eventual success in a course, assistance in connecting with potential employers, or help in major clarification and selection.

It was apparent through the conversations with students that the roster of available support structures was not known to every student. Students expressed differing levels of awareness of

the available support structures. This lack of consistent awareness suggests an important contributor to why some support structures were used more than others. In some cases, students were able to identify and connect with the appropriate institutional support on their own, having knowledge of the available support through previous experience or discovering the support structure by their own research into the available institutional support structures.

Further, through observing the interaction of students in the focus groups, hearing another student speak about a particular operation or program would be the first time the student became aware of it. Other students talked about finding out about available support structures previously through peers telling them. Speaking about subject-specific tutors, one student said “But I do know through some of my fellow students that there's tutors. Who knew there were nursing tutors? I didn't” (Elaine, Health Education). Other students connected to institutional support through referrals from peers or other college personnel.

Of all the support structures, Patriot's Place is the only structure that is not open to all students. Patriots Place is the College's student veteran resource center, which serves veterans and family members of veterans. It's interesting to note that only one student veteran responded to the study, and he indicated that he regularly used Patriot's Place while he was taking classes at the Pendleton Campus, where Patriot's Place is located. However, in the current term his classes are at a different campus and he does not take the time or effort to travel to the Pendleton Campus to use Patriot's Place.

4.5 Factors Which Complicate Continued Enrollment

Throughout the discussion above, several items and situations have been mentioned that present competing commitments for adult students as they engage in the learning environment. These factors are often inter-connected, and often the student is balancing more than one of these factors. It was apparent that not every participant faced the same level of complications. Some students had extensive support systems, while others had less robust support systems. Participants described factors related to returning to education after being away, career changes, family commitments (both children and others), financial pressures, physical changes, program scheduling, technology challenges, institutional miscommunication, and work schedules. Several of these factors were discussed above. The following sections explore some of the more common or complicated factors.

4.5.1 Family Commitments

Providing for a family is a common motivating factor for the adult student, as discussed earlier. Having a family to support can be a powerful influence to continue to the completion of an educational goal. At the same time, parenthood presents a complicating factor for the adult student. The adult student is often working to provide for the children. At the same time, the adult student spends time meeting the scheduling and care needs of their children. In addition to work, adult students spend time running children to different commitments, as they don't want to put their children's lives on hold. Some adult students described limiting their children's activities so that the balance between family commitments and academic engagement can be effectively balanced.

Several participants described situations where childcare is difficult. Either they are single parents or have partners who work full-time as well. Participants talked about childcare as an example of how they are being supported, but also described it as a challenge. When the personal support system is not adequate to meet this childcare need, the adult student often has to choose to skip class and negotiate with the instructor to be able to make up the absence. At these times, it's not an easy decision to make. Several adult students described keeping their motivation to provide for their families and the associated childcare challenges simultaneously. Keeping the motivation in mind helps to mitigate the challenge. The quote below also highlights some of the sacrifices that members of the student's personal support system make.

I think I've definitely thought about giving up, you know. There's been times last semester I wanted to just give up. And then you know, just like I said the guilt, because I can't be the kind of mom I want to be, they're having to understand that mom's trying to better herself. But, to a 13 year old, there's only so much comprehension there. And he still knows that he's not able to play sports or, you know. And those are the times that I can't go back. So yeah, I definitely thought about, you know, giving up sometimes. I'm just trying to just stop myself from thinking that way. And just remember how far I've come, and you know, just keep telling myself, it'll get here quickly. And you'll be glad you toughed it out.

(Jill, Health Education student)

4.5.2 Scheduling Logistics

Finding a schedule that can accommodate family, work, and academics is difficult. Adult students expend significant energy and effort to ensure that these areas are balanced and receive the necessary attention. Unfortunately, these commitments often have concurrent needs. A student may not be able to change their work schedule to be able to attend a requisite class. Classes may be held at the time that children need to be picked up from school or transported to another commitment. Chris (Engineering and Industrial Technology student) has to find alternative transportation to get his daughter to her activities when he has class:

I'm a single dad. So, that that takes a lot of time. Wednesday nights is that's usually my daughter's church time with her youth group. But she has one of the counselors at the youth group come and pick her up. So, I'm able to make some changes in arrangements.

Students described difficulties in find alternate courses to work around these conflicting time requirements. Revisiting the personal relationship with faculty as a support mechanism, students described instructors being willing to work around one-time or occasional issues. However, adult student face real challenges in completing a program when there is the inability to be at a required class. Often in the programs that have smaller cohorts and a narrow course availability, students either cannot continue or must make significant changes to family and work logistics to make their academics work. While most students expressed the understanding that this might happen, they were also frustrated at having to rearrange what they consider higher priority commitments.

Students described evening and online classes as powerful solutions to these scheduling concerns. In the EIT division, the student enrolled in programs with accessible evening schedules were grateful to have that option. Without the ability to come in the evening, they would not be able to participate in the program. Similarly, online classes that allow students to work on their own schedules provided relief from these concerns.

A driving consideration for students to stay on track in their curriculum is the availability of a particular course from term to term. Some classes are not offered every term. If a student is not able to take the class, there may be a significant delay in the completion of the program and ultimate educational goal. One student described it:

Where, these classes are offered spring, these are offered in the fall, and these are offered in the summer, and that's it. If you miss it, this spring, you've gotta wait a whole year to come back to. That is probably one of my biggest challenges with it. (Jim, Engineering and Industrial Technology student)

Health education students expressed a unique perception in their division. As all of the health education programs require clinical experiences in the respective health care fields, these students expect at some point in their education to not be able to work, or at least work a very minimal schedule. For students who have a sufficient personal support system, including adequate financial support, this is a manageable occurrence. For those students who don't, it has made some of them question their ability to finish their program.

4.5.3 Institutional Miscommunication

Considering the desire for adult students to use their time on campus as productively as possible presented itself, any individual doesn't like to be shuffled from place to place to solve a problem. As the adult student considers time to be precious, this shuffling can be especially frustrating. Participants described several situations where they felt that College personnel in different offices provided conflicting information or resolutions about the same issue. Or, an employee provided information that ended up being inaccurate or misleading.

You get different answers from different people . . . I've started writing down who tells me what and when. Because then I'll go and call later and say, "Okay, well, this is what I was told when did this change?" And they'll say that sometimes that's not that's not how it works. So that was one of my issues is I would get different answers from in people. So, I never knew what was accurate.
(Jennifer, Health Education Student)

One student described her attempt to find financial resources to meet her housing and food needs. Due to her course schedule, she wasn't able to work as much as she needed and was having trouble paying her mortgage and putting food on the table. She was told by one employee to go to wellness programs to receive direct assistance with this. The employee knew that they were able to help other students in similar situations. This raised the hopes of the student who saw a possible solution to her needs. However, when the student visited wellness programs, she was not qualified for the relevant social programs. The student saw this as a failure due to miscommunication and poor cross-training among College personnel. The student spent several days on this endeavor, only to come up empty-handed in the end. Other students described similar

situations where it seemed that employees were ignorant of how other parts of the College operated, leading to wasted time on the student's part.

4.6 Suggested Support Structures

Participants also described potential support structures or concepts which would help them be more successful. These suggestions included new structures that don't exist at the College currently or are suggestions for improved practices or structures. These suggested support structures were put together by an analysis of the protocol questions which asked students to identify what support structures are not helpful or what is missing from their Tri-County experiences which help them be successful. These suggested support structures included providing schedules for academic and co-curricular experiences that are conducive to adult student schedules, better physical facilities, better advertising of available support structures, broader individual resources, provide childcare, more intentional connection with other adult students, better technology, and a broader slate of work-based learning experiences. Overall, providing more conducive schedules, connecting with other adult students, better advertising of services, and a broader slate of work-based learning experiences were the most cited suggested support structures. A discussion of these more popular suggested support structures follows, including an effort to discuss how these suggested support structures were distributed between the divisions. It's important to note that these suggested support structures connect back to the factors that contribute to the student's ability to persist. The subsequent discussion also attempts to highlight these connections.

4.6.1 Schedules Conducive to Adult Student Schedules

The competing factors discussed earlier limit the amount of time that adult students have to commit to their academic requirements for class attendance, preparation for class, and completion of assignments. Study participants indicated that they are balancing family and work responsibilities, which contribute to this limitation of available time. Similarly, they describe the time they are spending on campus as mostly devoted to completing academic work or taking care of specific task on campus, leaving little time for co-curricular involvement. The challenges associated with scheduling logistics, as discussed earlier, are connected to and influence the suggestion of providing scheduling options for both classes and co-curricular events to allow for a greater engagement from adult students. Regarding co-curricular events and structures, participants said that they didn't engage due to the lack of time, not interest or relevance to their goals.

Currently there are very few co-curricular events that occur in the evening time. When viewed practically, providing an accommodating schedule means providing classes and co-curricular events in the evening when adult students are not working or are not managing transportation logistics for children and family. Participants, especially those in the health education division and Engineering and Industrial Technology division discussed not just the timing of individual classes, but also how often courses are offered in the program rotation. Not being able to take a course in a specific term may mean waiting two to three terms until that course is available again.

4.6.2 Connecting to Other Adult Students

Thinking back to the perceived differences between adult and traditional students, remember that adult students felt out of place and connecting with traditional students was difficult. Even though about 1 in 6 students at Tri-County is an adult student, they struggle to connect with other adult students. The ability to connect with other adult students was important to students in the Business and Public Services and Health Education divisions specifically. Many of the students indicated a common motivation to participate in the study was the opportunity to meet other adult students. They believed that attending the focus group would expose them to other adult students. Participants described the possibility of adult student support groups or periodic social events just for adult students as something that would be a practical way to make this connection. These structures would allow adult students to compare experiences and bolster their own confidence in their ability to finish their educational goal. Hearing that other adult students have similar struggles and seeing others succeed combine to help increase this confidence.

[Referring to other adults] I'll say, "I'm in college. I'm doing this." And they're like, "What? How do you do that? That's impossible. I can't do that." . . . They act like that is the most abstract thing they've ever heard in their lives, so maybe put it out there . . . [Y]ou don't have to be 18 living with your parents to be successful here, because you don't know. You know. (Jennifer, Health Education student)

4.6.3 Better Advertising of Services

A benefit of using focus groups as the collection instrument is the interaction between participants. As participants talked about the different support structures they used at the College, the other students in the groups often expressed their ignorance of the availability of a particular support structure. This observation, coupled with several explicit comments regarding the lack of availability of specific information about some support structures, provide credence to the suggestion by some participants that the College needs to advertise support structures better. This suggestion was articulated by students from the Business and Public Services and the Health Education divisions. Participants indicated that they can't access a support structure if they don't know it is there.

*I think marketing for some things could be better. I'm going back to the whole students not eating thing. Like it's most students on campus, I don't think they know to go down to downstairs, to the students pantry. I put that out there every chance I get . . . But I think marketing for some things can be a little bit better. . . There's some students that don't know everything that they can get.
(Abbie, Business and Public Services student)*

This is especially important for those students who are only on campus in the evening or for limited periods of time, as they do not have the opportunity to explore the campus while offices are open or to attend campus events which promote specific support structures. Email was described as the most effective method for this advertising to occur. Participants indicated that they do read email and would pay attention to content about support structures that are relevant to

them. Another method of advertising was a campus tour that specifically took students around campus to show them where various support offices and programs are located.

4.6.4 Broader Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Work-based learning is the term used by Tri-County, and others, to describe experiences outside the classroom that expose a student to the practical and daily operations of a job. The Engineering and Industrial Technology students talked about the expansion of available work-based learning opportunities as something that would benefit their ability to succeed. The other division students did not talk about this structure specifically. However, the students from the Health Education division have this concept as a required part of every program through clinical experiences in their respective fields. This suggested support structure is connected to the adult student's common educational goal to get a better job and do so quickly.

The participants who talked about work-based learning as important did so for two reasons. First, they see these opportunities as concrete ways to meet employers and provide those employers a more holistic view of the student's ability to be successful in a specific job. Face time with employers is important. The second reason is an extension of the first, in that these experiences provide a way for adult students to address any age bias that may exist. One student in particular talked about how this bias may be unconscious but would provide a way for him to show potential employers, that even though he is older, his work ethic and experience would offset any deficits an employer may perceive related to technology adeptness. It's important to note his identification of the younger students as "kids," which illustrates his estimation of their experience level.

But I applied for several internships you know, and I think they don't think I'm the profile for that . . . I know kids in our program who have internships at BMW, Bosch, Schneider Electric. Some of them it's hard for them to get to nine o'clock class. I've not missed class since I've been here. I think one of the main things that I can shine in is work ethic. (Richard, Engineering and Industrial Technology student)

This chapter highlighted the key findings of this study. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors influence adult students to remain enrolled. Time spent on campus is mainly concerned with class and related academic activities. Factors that provide support and contribute to adult students remaining enrolled were identified. Adult students consider their college experience, and how they navigate that experience, to be different than traditional students. Individual connections with college employees, particularly faculty members, play an important role in providing direct assistance to adult students and providing a positive perception of the institution commitment to adult student success. Personal support systems look different for each adult student but provide needed support for adult students so that they can better engage in their academic life.

Factors that complicated the adult student's ability to remain enrolled were outlined. Family commitments provide logistical and scheduling challenges. Institutional miscommunication also complicated adult students' navigation of college processes and identification of supporting resources.

The last set of findings were suggestions for how Tri-County can better support adult students. Providing scheduling options that meet adult student's competing priorities are important. The ability to connect with other adult students provides an opportunity for shared experiences and encouragement. Support structures and programs should be better marketed to

students to increase awareness. The expansion of the availability of work-based learning experiences provide a greater opportunity for connections with possible employers and career options.

5.0 Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this study are illustrative of how the adult student population at Tri-County navigates their college experience. The individual experiences of these adult students exposed broad themes and considerations of what those experiences entail. In this chapter, I discuss three key conclusions drawn from these findings related to the individuality of adult students, the importance of personal connections, and the use of support structures. These conclusions connect with and illustrate many of the concepts discussed previously in the literature review. Unsurprisingly, the findings were in line with the information gathered through the literature review and connect back to the theoretical framework. Next, the identified needs are introduced and discussed. These needs provide the basis for the recommendations.

5.1 Study Conclusions

As the conclusions, and subsequently the recommendations, are discussed, it is important to consider them in context to the study's theoretical framework. The decision of students at commuter institutions to persist is an interaction of their entry characteristics, their external environment, and their institutional commitment (Braxton et al, 2014). Further, adult students' decision to persist is further influenced by the intersection of their prior life experiences and concurrent obligations with learning outcomes and orienting frameworks that support these experience obligations to reach their goal (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

5.1.1 Individuality of Adult Students

One of the broadest conclusions to draw from this study is one that is implicit but important enough to articulate explicitly. No adult student is the same, just as no other student is the same. Participants in the study talked about the differences they see between themselves and traditional students. At the same time, a review of participant stories illustrates the differences between each of them. Institution should consider these individual differences as they work with adult students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Educational goals were different, with some students wanting to continue studies at another institution while others were looking to move directly into the workplace. Participants talked about different reasons why they are at the College and what they hope to do after completion. These differences in educational goals influence the motivation of individual students (Liao, Ferdenzi, & Edlin, 2012; Fong et al., 2016). As students in the Arts and Sciences division were the least represented in this study, it's not surprising that more participants described entering the workplace directly after completion at Tri-County as a goal than continuing on to a different educational institution. Programs in the other three divisions are designed with entrance into the workforce as the purpose of those programs.

Most participants had some combination of work and family commitments. As described in the literature review, work and family are the most prevalent competing priorities for adult students (Capps, 2010). Some students were younger with families, while others were older and in a different family situation, some with grandchildren. Some participants were single with no immediate family. Some students had sufficient financial means, while others struggled to afford their education. Some were coming back after significant time away from formal education. Some were coming back after experiencing job loss or relocation. Combinations of these characteristics

present the unique nature of each adult student's needs and situation. While this study provides some broad recommendations for how Tri-County can better serve adult students, it's important to remember that every adult student is different.

This individuality of students is important as it highlights the complexity of providing support for adult students as they consider their persistence decision. Considering the factors and influences that comprise the framework behind the persistence decision (Braxton et al, 2014; Donaldson & Graham, 1999) and how these factors present in each individual student's experience, each individual persistence decision will necessarily be different. Students in the different divisions, or in different life circumstances, placed importance on different things, which was evident in the findings. Additionally, each college student brings a different set of entry characteristics which influences the student's persistence decision, influenced by the subsequent use of institutional support systems and the student's perception of the institution's commitment to them (Braxton et al., 2014).

As each student considers their own individual experiences and obligations, they make the most productive decision which meets their educational goal while still fulfilling their concurrent obligations (Capps, 2010; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Students from different divisions used different support programs. Students who are parents were concerned about childcare, while those who didn't have children didn't talk about it. Engineering and Industrial Technology students talked about work-based learning experiences as an important future concept, while those students in Health Education didn't, most likely due to the inclusion of work-based learning already inherent in each Health Education program.

5.1.2 Importance of Connecting with a Faculty Member

The importance of individual connections between adult students and other individuals came across strongly as a support factor in this study. Participants talked about individual relationships in context of their personal support systems and with individuals at Tri-County. It would be difficult, and out of the realm of Tri-County's ability, to provide support structures that directly help student create relationships to form their personal support systems. Tri-County does not provide services that actively reach into the social experience and support system of the student. This is different than how institutions with residential populations support students. In these residential settings, the institution can influence the personal support system more directly through residence life staff and other structures which help student's actively manage their support system. However, keeping this limitation in mind, intentional development of employee and student relationships is feasible. Connecting with faculty was shown in the literature review to be a predictor of student success, increasing satisfaction with academic experience (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and integration into the institution's community (Barnett, 2010). The importance of these connections cannot be overlooked when considering the supporting factors that study participants identified.

Participants described faculty relationships most often as the structure that is helping them stay at Tri-County and be successful. While some staff relationships were mentioned, most often it was a faculty member with whom the student connected. This flows logically from how the participants described their time spent on campus, either in class or engaging in preparatory work for class. The academic classroom serves as the engagement center for most adult students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Considering this in the context of how adult students spend their time on campus, the faculty member naturally becomes the employee that the student interacts

with the most. There are two formal roles that faculty members fulfill for every student at Tri-County: as instructor and as advisor. Each student is assigned a faculty advisor, who works with the student from term to term until departure. As instructors, the connection is more temporary as a student may only have a particular instructor once and never take a class with that instructor again.

One might consider the advisor as that individual that adult students would naturally use to serve as this support structure. There may be students who do so. However, this wasn't what was described by study participants. When they talked about the faculty members who had helped them most, these faculty members were instructors. If the faculty member was also an advisor, the participants didn't articulate that specifically.

Some students may never have their advisor serve as an instructor for one of their classes. At the same time, they may have another faculty member multiple times as an instructor for different classes, contributing to a more long-term relationship. Over time as the student interacts with the instructor and builds trust and confidence in an instructor, the support relationship begins and grows. Trust and confidence also contribute to a positive perception of the institution's commitment to supporting the student, which in turn positively influences the persistence decision (Braxton et al., 2014). The student has the opportunity to learn about the instructor's personality, how the instructor works with other students, and responds to requests for assistance. In contrast, the advising role doesn't provide the opportunity for the student to see how the advisor supports other students, and interaction is more infrequent. The advising relationship may only put the student and faculty member together on a regular but infrequent basis, and the student has less exposure to develop a relationship. Participants connected with faculty members whose advice and guidance were productive and the student found helpful.

5.1.3 Use of Student Support Structures

The motivation for adult students to connect to support structures at Tri-County is to meet an immediate need or an important long-term goal. One of the concepts embedded in Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model as part of this study's theoretical framework is the ability of adult learners to differentiate their learning into learning that can be applied to meet their educational goal and learning that can't. The learning that can be applied to their educational goal is more meaningful to them and they will commit to engage more fully to those learning experiences (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Similarly, based on participants' descriptions of when and how they engaged in support structures and programs at Tri-County, adult students are willing to make the time and effort commitment to access a support structure if they can see how the support structure can help them meet a need or goal. This decision to engage is important, as choosing to devote time to such engagement takes time away from the rest of their commitments. As discussed previously in the findings, many adult students are challenged by a lack of time. Engaging in these support structures by choosing to visit a support office, attending a campus event, or attending a workshop, for example, necessitates a time commitment that may be outside the student's ordinary academic schedule. The adult student may need to adjust logistics and juggle details with individuals in their personal support system to do so. It's important that Tri-County considers the weight of this decision to engage and make those support structures efficient and productive for the students.

The literature review showed that adult students benefit from the ability to engage in services that both provide direct assistance and an opportunity to engage with others (Wurtz, 2015). As outlined earlier, adult students are engaging in formal student support structures at Tri-County, with the Tutoring Center and Career and Employability Resources being the two service-

based structures being used the most. The engagement with these two support structures also fits with the conclusion that adult students engage in those support structures which are most relevant to their needs and goals.

The Tutoring Center assists students in meeting an immediate need to be successful in a class or on a particular assignment, as well as providing assistance with developing longer-term skills such as time management and study strategies. Adult students see the connection with passing an assignment or class to their ultimate success in finishing the educational goal. By devoting time to visiting the Tutoring Center, the student is meeting an immediate need. Career and Employability Resources help students meet their longer-term goal, which often includes obtaining a job. Participants described visiting Career and Employability Resources to have resumes reviewed, to practice for interviews, and to connect directly with an employer for a work-based learning experience. All of these experiences are viewed by the adult student as a clear way to promote themselves in the best way to potential employers and navigate the hiring process as successfully as possible. This is important as many adult students are motivated by finding a better job so they can better support their families (Pusser et al., 2007).

Similarly, resource-based support structures, like the Financial Aid and Wellness Programs offices provide students with the solution to meeting an individual need or long-term goal. However, the scope and breadth of the services that these resource-based structures provide was not known to most of the participants. While students may have been familiar with one or two of the services available through these services, there were services that were unknown.

Financial Aid is a natural support structure for students to engage with. It is part of the admission process and emphasized in new student orientation programs. All students are encouraged to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to be eligible for

grants and scholarships. As students experience challenges being able to pay for tuition and supplies, they often visit the Financial Aid office as the first natural step. Offering financial aid services and assistance navigating those services is important to helping students stay enrolled (Bean, 1990; Cummins, 2014) At the same time, Financial Aid is a familiar resource to faculty and staff on campus and is frequent referral to students in financial need. What seems to be less known to adult students, discovered through these conversations, is the general financial management education that the Financial Aid office can provide to students.

Wellness Programs was also talked about with an apparent lack of knowledge about the complete roster of their services. Students often found their way to Wellness Programs by direct referrals from a faculty or staff member, and often referrals from the Financial Aid office. It didn't seem that students connected with them because they previously knew what Wellness Programs offered. Students talked about Wellness Programs providing them with direct connections to resources to help them mitigate challenges that were competing with their ability to focus on their academic work, such as assistance connecting with resources to assist with food and housing deficits. Similar to the assistance provided by financial aid to navigate tuition expenses, these types of needs are fundamental to the student's ability to engage successfully in the academic process. Students are willing to engage in the process to secure these resources as they see the direct connection to how doing so helps them stay enrolled, or in some cases helps them meet basic life needs. This further illustrates the conclusion that students are willing to devote time to engaging in support services if they can see the direct benefit. This may be why adult students are not engaging in the Leading Edge Experience programs and events, at least as addressed in this study.

Adult students may not see the direct benefit to engaging in the Leading Edge Experience programs. An analysis of who is engaging in the Leading Edge Experience programs performed by the Student Development personnel at Tri-County indicated that traditional students are engaging in these programs at a much higher frequency than adult students. Part of this is because programs through the Leading Edge Experience are not generally available at times that adult students are. At the same time, it seems that adult students are not engaging in these programs because they don't see the connection between the Leading Edge Experience' content and how it can help them meet their needs and long-term goals. This may be due to the broad nature of the Leading Edge Experience, which includes educational, social, multicultural, and health-related programming.

5.2 Identification of Needs

The purpose of this study was to identify existing gaps between the needs of adult students and the student support programs and services at Tri-County. A component of understanding these gaps to inform recommendations for improvements is to understand what structures students are using as support structures. Considering the conclusions outlined above in the context of the current support structures and programs available at Tri-County, several specific gaps exist. These gaps represent the needs that can be addressed by Tri-County to provide support structures and programs to better support adult student persistence. Some of these needs relate to the absence of a specific support structure to assist students with different challenges. Other needs are related to logistical and implementation items that prevent existing support structures from being as effective

for adult students as they could be. Ultimately the recommendations are presented with the intent of addressing these needs and closing these gaps.

5.2.1 The need to provide formal methods to create relationships between adult students and faculty members.

There is a need for adult students to connect with faculty members as members of their support systems. Students value personal connections with employees, particularly faculty, as support structures (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Barnett, 2010), but there is not a formal method in place that facilitates this. As discussed above, the advisor role provides a formal connection, but is not necessarily fulfilling this support need. The advising role has a determined scope to it, which doesn't necessarily include a broader support discussion. Helping the adult student identify a faculty member, or staff member in an appropriate role, such as a student success coach, can be instrumental in helping certain students persist to their goal. Promoting these relationships through a more formal system would be advantageous to the student's ability to persist.

5.2.2 The need to connect adult students with other adult students.

There is also a strong desire for adult students to connect with other adult students. Participants talked about this desire as a way to find support through shared experience and mutual support, as outlined in the findings. Several participants came to the focus group with the expectation to connect with other adult students. Other participants specifically articulated the desire for an adult student support group. There is not a formal mechanism for this at Tri-County. Adult students are creating these peer relationships individually. Consider the perception by adult

students in this study who felt set apart from traditional students and often felt that they were the only adult student in their classes. This is important, as adult students view the classroom as their engagement center (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Providing a way for adult students to easily find and connect with other adult students adds an important piece to their support systems.

5.2.3 The need to provide support structures when adult students can access them

Adult students face significant challenges and competing priorities in their educational journey (Capps, 2010; Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gillman, 2016). Participants described navigating logistical challenges with balancing work and family schedules to provide the ability to attend class and complete academic work. When academics compete with work and family, academics lost. Several participants described missing class due to a family member's illness or changed work schedule. The available support structures at Tri-County, such as Wellness Programs, can help mitigate many of these challenges. However, these support structures are not always available when adult students are on campus. College offices and services generally close at 5pm, with some key offices staying open later. However, no formal programming is scheduled for evening hours. Consider how adult students described their time on campus. They came to campus just in time for class and often left right after. They did not come to campus to spend additional time outside of class, unless it was to study or visit a specific office or complete a task. Accommodating the scheduling needs of adult students is important for institutions to consider as part of their efforts to support these students (Bean, 1990; Capps, 2010; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). As such, an evident need is to provide scheduling options for both academic experiences and support programs that fit adult student scheduling concerns. It flows naturally that adult students can't get help from a particular structure if they can't access it.

5.2.4 The need to market available support structures and programs effectively

A related need is the lack of awareness of some of the existing support structures. Through the interactions between participants, it was evident that students were not aware of the breadth of support structures and programs that exist. In several instances, students described first learning about a service or program when another participant talked about it. Also, comparing the existing roster of support programs to those that participants talked about highlights a dissonance between the two. At the same time, participants said that when they were aware of support structures, through referrals, by self-discovery, or responding to advertising efforts, they used those services. Participants didn't express hesitation or reluctance to connect with structures that would help them navigate a challenge, consistent with the conclusion that adult students will engage in activities that meet a need. Individual motivating factors provide the influence for adult students to use these services, including those external commitments and extrinsic factors that impact the adult student's decision to persist (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Fong, Davis, Kim, Y., Kim, Y.W., Marriott, and Kim, S., 2016) Increased or modified advertising efforts could expand the usage of existing support structures and programs.

5.3 Recommendations

Considering the conclusions and identified needs above, there are steps that Tri-County can take to support adult students with the overall goal of helping those students persist and reach their educational goal. The identified needs lead to the following recommendations. These recommendations provide direction about how Tri-County can respond to these needs. The

following recommendations identify actions Tri-County can take to either revise current support structures or create new structures that will address this needs gap. Many of the following recommendations don't necessarily require brand-new structures but do require Tri-County to consider how current programs can be adjusted to offer support to adult students. These recommendations don't discount the support that Tri-County is currently offering or suggest that what exists is not effective.

Creating an environment that is supportive of and encourages adult students to persist to their educational goal is the over-arching purpose behind these recommendations. The theoretical framework provides a structure for thinking about how support programs influence the adult student's decision to persist. There are influences and factors which combine with the adult student's external environment, experiences, and obligations (Braxton et al., 2014) and are filtered through the lens of how adult students learn and process (Donaldson & Graham, 1999) to make a final decision to remain enrolled. The following recommendations are put forth to help Tri-County positively increase the student's institutional commitment.

5.3.1 Recommendation 1: Identify the specific needs of adult students

As described in the findings, discussed, each adult student has a unique experience, but also has some shared experiences and characteristics with other students. Participants described many of the same challenges and competing priorities such as work, family, and transitioning back to education. At the same time, there were unique experiences shared as well, such as the domestic violence that Jennifer discussed. Some of these shared experiences and characteristics are common enough among adult students that Tri-County could support certain needs with direct support programs. Addressing specific needs provides an opportunity for Tri-County to positively

influence the adult student's view of institutional commitment (Braxton et al., 2014). While many of the findings from this study parallel findings in the literature review, identifying those needs and experiences that are relevant to adult students at Tri-County would create support structures and programs focused on these specific needs. Tri-County, as with any institution, has finite human and financial resources. By intentionally investigating the needs of its students, Tri-County can best use those resources by focusing its efforts.

This recommendation mandates more research with this population. To ensure that Tri-County is addressing the needs of adult students comprehensively, a broader sample of the adult student population needs to provide feedback to create this comprehensive view of what the needs of adult students at Tri-County are. This study has provided a starting place for Tri-County to use a method more conducive to efficiently working with a larger number of participants, such as survey. The initial findings in this study would provide an outline to create a protocol that provides the opportunity for participants to both verify these findings with a larger sample, but also to allow new participants to further develop Tri-County's knowledge about its adult student population.

One example of this from the study is childcare. Just among this small study population, the need and desire for childcare was brought up by several participants. If Tri-County was able to provide childcare to students, or make connecting to childcare easier, this would benefit many adult students. Adult students with children would have one logistic need resolved. In some cases, having their children in childcare at the same location as where they are taking classes might resolve tangential needs as well. For example, for students who use public transit, being able to bring children with them to campus for care would remove the need for them to figure out transporting their children to a separate childcare location and then themselves to campus.

Almost certainly, there are other needs that exist that could be addressed with other direct services. This recommendation is not about providing childcare, but about conducting further research into what specific need exists with a larger sample of the adult student population. Connecting with a larger sample population would ensure that any identified need was more readily generalizable to the adult student population and would provide a more concrete view of the existing needs. Tri-County can then take this information and determine if there are additional support structures that could be put in place to address these needs.

5.3.2 Recommendation 2: Educate employees about the adult student experience

Current support structures and systems are helping students but are structured around serving traditional students. Consider the definitions of adult and traditional from the introduction which highlight the differences between the two types of students. Current support structures and programs assume students will have time to devote to extra and non-academic events while on campus. While some key support offices do offer early evening hours, formal programming and events are scheduled most frequently between 10am and 2pm. Programs and structures are generally offered in a face to face format. Some offerings are done through video conferencing, such as tutoring sessions using Skype for Business.

This study found that adult students use their time on campus differently than traditional students. They generally limit their on-campus time to class time and use any additional time on campus to engage in study time or completing a specific task. Due to work schedules they often take evening classes. The methods in which support structures and programs are currently being offered don't accommodate the adult student's orientation to time on campus and availability to engage in those structures.

In addition to thinking differently about the logistics of when support structures and programs are available, considering the adult student experience in the format and flow of these structures is also important (Capps, 2010). This study found that adult students are concerned about a lack of time and the desire to know how specific content helps them meet an immediate need or long-term goal. Employees should consider concepts such as these in the development and implementation of support structures and programs, which necessitates an understanding of the adult student experience.

For the remaining recommendations to be successful, it is important that the employees at Tri-County, including both faculty and staff, understand and appreciate those differences. Included in the discussion of several of these recommendations is the notion that acknowledging the different needs of adult students and providing related support increases the adult student's perception of institutional commitment, which is a positive influence on the decision to persist (Braxton et al., 2014). Providing professional development opportunities centered on understanding the adult student experience would provide employees the appropriate context in which to develop programs for adult students. Including adult students in these professional development opportunities as presenters or on a panel would provide employees with an intentional exposure to the adult student experience. Thinking differently about how support structures and programs are formatted to meet adult student needs and are available at conducive times has the potential to increase adult student engagement with these structures.

5.3.3 Recommendation 3: Encourage the development of one-on-one employee relationships with adult students

The most important support structure that adult students in this study found helpful and supported their success was an individual connection to a Tri-County employee. Most often this connection was with a faculty member, which is natural as adult students consider the classroom to be the engagement center of their experience (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). An identified need is the lack of formal structures to create these relationships. This recommendation complements the first recommendation to provide professional development to employees related to the adult student experience. A natural extension of this professional development is an employee cohort that is well positioned to help individual adult students. Providing a way, or encouraging, employees to form mentor-like relationships with adult students would be a powerful way to support adult students.

Consider the I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) program at Tri-County, which is a specialized program for students who are under-resourced or need additional support to be able to attend Tri-County, modelled after similar programs offered across the nation. The enrollment in this program is intentionally limited to a small cohort. The employees in the program provide individual case management support and help students navigate Tri-County processes and find resources to mitigate their life situation. The I-BEST staff do this by collaborating strongly with other Tri-County offices. When I-Best students talk about why they are successful, they almost always talk about how one of the I-BEST staff was the key to them continuing as a student and their success as a student. The I-Best employees are intentionally creating relationships with the students to ensure their engagement with the program and eventual success.

This intentionality of relationships is the main takeaway from this example. The I-BEST model is not one that is scale-able to the entire college, and this recommendation is not to adopt such a model for all programs. However, developing individual relationships is important for adult students. Figuring out a way to do that more broadly within the Tri-County adult student population is advantageous to increasing the student's institutional commitment. When a student feels that institution is committed to their success, this perception positively influences their persistence decision (Braxton et al., 2014).

This may be the most difficult recommendation to implement. There are significantly more students than there are employees. Such a relationship would take time, which is as precious a commodity to employees as it is to adult students. Also, not every adult student may need such a relationship. Consideration of this recommendation also begs the questions of how to identify those students who could benefit from such a relationship.

5.3.4 Recommendation 4: Create an adult student support group or student organization

Study participants described their desire to connect with other adult students. Concurrently, they expressed their perception that they felt out of place and felt like they were the only adult student in their classes. Participants described difficulty in connecting with traditional students, due to the perceived differences in their current life experiences and academic commitment. Many of the participants chose to attend the focus group in the attempt to meet other adult students. An identified need is the lack of formal methods for adult students to connect with each other.

It was clear from this study that they consider themselves to be an under-represented population at Tri-County. Enrollment data shows that about 1 in 6 students at Tri-County is an

adult student (Tri-County, 2018). Considering the impact that institutional integrity and commitment to the student has on the persistence decision of students (Braxton et al., 2014), providing a structured method for adult students to connect with each other would close the gap between a desire of adult students and an identified need. Tri-County can help students create an adult student organization with the intent of providing a way for adult students to connect. This organization could meet at regular intervals at times that are conducive for adult students.

5.3.5 Recommendation 5: Provide Leading Edge Experience programs in ways conducive to adult students and promote the Leading Edge Experience so that adult students see the relevance to them

Participants described the perception that they are more committed academically than traditional students due to their broader life experiences. Additionally, this study has concluded that adult students will connect with structures and programs that they find relevant to future needs, such as job searching. The Leading Edge Experience is a broad slate of co-curricular programs that provide additional educational and social opportunities to students. The purpose of these programs is to expand general education skills that are learned in the academic programs are related to the general education outcomes of Tri-County. The Leading Edge Experience also incorporates the leadership and student organization experiences at Tri-County. The overall goal of these programs is for the student to refine the skills which employers or other institutions find desirable, such as communication skills, problem-solving, integrated learning, digital literacy, and collaboration. These skills are also Tri-County's general education outcomes embedded in each academic program. Additionally, development of these skills helps bolster the adult student's self-efficacy, which contributes positively to the decision to persist (Liao et al., 2012). If the Leading

Edge Experience programs can be marketed in such a way for adult students to see the relevance to enhancing their employment or transfer prospects or how the programs can meet an immediate need, adult students may be more willing to engage in these programs.

This recommendation is two-fold, with the first part to provide these programs in ways that are conducive to adult students' scheduling needs. As discussed previously, this study has concluded that adult students are spending time on campus when support programs are not available. Most Leading Edge Experience programs and events are scheduled during the 10am-2pm timeframe. This is not always conducive to adult students in keeping with a previously identified need. Tri-County should look to offer programs at the times when adult students are available, which can be identified through the investigation of needs outlined in recommendation 1. Leading Edge Experience programming could also be offered in alternative formats, such as online workshops and interactive experiences that adult students can access at their convenience. This would remove the need for adult students to come to campus at specific times.

Providing a wider selection of times and formats for these programs is not sufficient, however. As discussed earlier, this study has concluded that adult students engage in extra experiences when they find those experiences relevant to their immediate needs or long-term goals. The second part of this recommendation is to revise the marketing and promotional process for the Leading Edge Experience to emphasize the relevance to adult students' goals to encourage them to attend. When adult students realize that the programs offered can help them connect to available resources and hone employability and academic skills, they may be more likely to utilize the programs in the Leading Edge Experience. Using the identified needs from recommendation 3 as the impetus for new programs in the Leading Edge Experience would also increase the relevance for adult students.

This recommendation also highlights the importance of employees understanding the adult student experience (recommendation 1). An extension of this recommendation is to ensure that employees understand how the Leading Edge Experience benefits students. Adult students may also be more likely to attend Leading Edge Experience programs if an employee they trust recommends it, connecting back to the finding about the importance of individual relationships. If the employee understands the relevance of program content as applied to adult students they may be more comfortable referring the adult student to attend.

5.3.6 Recommendation 6: Create more intentional collaborative partnerships between support programs.

The last recommendation is informed by considering the challenges participants described related to limited time and balancing competing commitments and the identified need to provide support structures and programs when adult students can access them. If adult students could access multiple services at the same time, their time spent on finding support would be less. This recommendation is for more formal collaborations between different service offices at Tri-County to connect students to related resources. This study found that certain existing support structures are more heavily used by adult students than others. Consider the described usage of the Tutoring Center and Career and Employability Resources. Adult students are already going to these locations for assistance. This presents a prime opportunity for Tri-County to leverage the usage of these services as points of contact for other support services. Employees in these high frequency operations should be knowledgeable about available support structures and programs. Direct referral systems at these locations would make connecting adult students with other support structures more efficient. This efficiency would contribute to a positive view from the adult

student about Tri-County's commitment to them, which is an important consideration in the persistence decision (Braxton et al., 2014)

One example that Tri-County is already using is the collaboration between the Wellness Programs office and the Financial Aid office for students who use the food pantry. As part of the process to access the food pantry, repeat students are required to connect with the Financial Aid office to learn about budgeting and person finances. When these two resources are combined, student receive a more robust and directed response to mitigate a need. By creating more programs that have similar inter-dependencies, student can more efficiently access needed support.

5.4 Conclusion

This study sought to understand the adult student experience at Tri-County. Particular attention was paid to the challenges that adult students face and the supporting mechanisms that assist adult students in remaining enrolled. The findings related to these challenges and supports were compared to the existing support structures and programs at Tri-County to identify the gap between what support systems adult student need and what support systems are available at the college. As seen in the discussion about identified needs, the gap was not limited to the absence of certain support systems but also the dissonance between how supports structures and programs are being offered and how adult students are willing or able to connect with these structures.

Adult students at Tri-County experience a complex interaction between their academic commitments and their non-academic life. The desire to complete their academic journey motivates adult students for a variety of reasons, but often to put themselves and their families in a better economic situation (Liao et al., 2012; Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam,

& Turner, 2007). Competing challenges and priorities create an environment that can be difficult to navigate successfully. Balancing these competing priorities within the academic structure often requires the student to connect with support structures and programs at Tri-County. The identified needs that presented themselves through this study highlight how existing support structures and programs could more effectively support adult students as they navigate this environment. This study identified several needs to be addressed with respect to adult students and their use of support structures and programs. There is a need to provide mechanisms to create individual relationships between adult students and both faculty members and other adult students. There is a need to provide ways for adult students to connect with each other. There is a need to provide support structures and programs at times and in formats that adult student can access conveniently. There is a need to market existing programs to highlight the relevance of program content to meeting adult students' goals and needs.

This study doesn't suggest that adult students don't use support structures or that the current existing support structures at Tri-County are ineffective. Current support structures are being used and are helping adult students. The Tutoring Center and Career and Employability Resources are two support structures that are being used frequently by adult students. Support structures that help adult students meet an immediate need or future career goal seem to be the most relevant to adult students. These structures are the ones which adult students will commit time and energy to engaging.

The recommendations presented in this study are designed to help Tri-County provide support structures and programs that fit with adult student schedules and address existing challenges. By doing so, Tri-County is demonstrating its commitment to assisting the adult student in persisting to the educational goal (Braxton et al., 2014). While there were recommendations to

create new support structures, these recommendations also address how Tri-County can further understand the adult student experience to provide more focused support structures and programs to adult students. These recommendations are offered to provide some examples of how Tri-County can better encourage and create an environment where adult students are more likely to persist. These recommendations are informed and connected to the conclusions and findings resulting from this study. Further consideration regarding appropriate implementation is encouraged. Many of these recommendations will require additional resources, or the creative use of existing resources.

My role at Tri-County as Dean of Student Development places me in an active role in the implementation of these recommendations. Some of the recommendations require more preparation than others. Some may be more feasible than others. Tri-County will need to conduct feasibility reviews of each recommendation to determine if a recommendation is reasonable, and if so, how to implement it. These reviews would be best done by a team comprised of individuals who have a natural connection due to their role or a strong interest in supporting adult students. In reality, any resulting support structures could benefit all students, not just adult students. However, at least one recommendation can be implemented fairly quickly and with minimal investment of resources, Recommendation 4 to create a way for adult students to connect with other adult students. Student Development can work to create an organization to this. Based upon the expressed interest and desire of participants to have such a structure, I would not anticipate much difficulty in finding adult students to assist in creating this organization.

Tri-County's vision is "Passionate people transforming lives and building strong communities one student at a time" (Tri-County Technical College, 2019). Adult students have goals motivated by their individual life situations and responsibilities. Their college experience is

different than traditional students. By endeavoring to understand adult students better and working to support them in intentional ways, Tri-County is better positioned to apply this vision to the individual adult student.

Appendix A Recruitment Email

Hello <NAME>

You are invited to participate in a focus group for adult students at Tri-County Technical College. My name is Mark Dougherty. I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh; this focus group process is part of my final stages in the doctoral degree process. I am also the dean of student development for Tri-County. Part of my role as dean is to ensure that you have access to support programs that will help you succeed academically and meet your educational goals.

Your feedback about these programs will help the College provide better support to students. In particular, we are interested in how we can best serve adult students. This focus group will allow you the opportunity to share your opinion about your experience at Tri-County and the support programs that are available.

The focus group is a one-time session lasting approximately 90 minutes. There will be approximately 5 students from your academic division who will share their opinions. The focus group will ask you questions about your individual experience at Tri-County. Your participation is not required.

If you are interested in participating in this focus group, please complete this short online form: <LINK TO ONLINE INTEREST FORM>.

Any questions you have about this invitation or the associated focus group can be directed to Mark Dougherty at 864-646-1871, or mdougher@tctc.edu.

Appendix B Online Interest Form

(Submitted online – questions or actions are highlighted)

Thank you for your interest in the focus group about support programs at Tri-County Technical College.

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. You may stop your participation at any time with no negative consequences. The focus group will consist of approximately 5 individuals from your academic division. There is minimal risk to you as an individual. Your responses will be confidential to the focus group research team and will not be shared in an identifiable way with any other entity.

If you are willing to participate in this focus group, please answer the following questions.

1. Please verify your name: <Name>
2. Are you interested in participating in this focus group? Yes No
3. For demographic purposes, please indicate which of the follow descriptors apply to you. You may choose as many as you wish:
 - I am the first person in my family to attend college.
 - I am a veteran.
 - I am a parent.
 - I work full-time.
 - I work part-time.
 - I work on campus as a work-study student.
 - This is my first semester at the college.

- I plan to finish my education goal this term.
- I receive financial aid.
- I am a full-time student (enrolled in four or more classes or 12 or more hours)

4. What is your major?

5. During which of the following timeframes are you available? Check all that apply.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Morning					
Afternoon					
Evening					

Thank you for your interest in this focus group. Your selection as a participant will be confirmed with you by email shortly. This confirmation will include the date and time of the focus group. Focus groups will be held in the Student Success Center on the Pendleton Campus.

If you have any questions or concerns related to this invitation or your participation in this focus group, please contact Mark Dougherty at 864-646-1871, or mdougher@tctc.edu.

Submit

Appendix C Consent Form

You have been asked to participate in this focus group as part of a study related to the student services support programs at Tri-County Technical College. This study is focused on how these student services support programs support non-traditional students at TCTC. This study will benefit students as the goal is to guide the implementation of future support programs for non-traditional students. This study is being completed as part of the dissertation process of Mark Dougherty at the University of Pittsburgh. Mark Dougherty also serves as the dean of student development at TCTC.

Why have you been asked to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this research study because you are a non-traditional student at Tri-County Technical College. Your feedback and insight are directly relevant to the purpose of this study.

Nature of Participation

Your participation in this focus group is completely voluntary. You may choose to not participate, and you may stop your participation at any time with no negative consequences. Your decision to participate in the study or withdraw from the focus group will not impact your standing and/or relationship with Tri-County Technical College.

The Risk to you

There is minimal risk to you as an individual. Your responses will be confidential to the focus group research team. Your research data may be shared with investigators conducting other research and Tri-County Technical College research representatives. However, this information will be shared in a de-identified manner (without identifiers).

Audio Recording

This focus group discussion will be audio recorded to ensure that your feedback and comments are captured accurately. Your participation will remain confidential with the study coordinator. Only members of the research team will have access to the audio recording, which will be securely stored. You will not be identified in any reports or other documents resulting from this study.

Compensation and Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for your participation in this study. You will not receive any monetary compensation for your participation in this focus group.

Questions

Any questions you may have about this study can be directed to Mark Dougherty at mdougher@tctc.edu, or 864-646-1871

Appendix D Focus Group Interview Protocol

Welcome

Opening Script

My name is Mark Dougherty. I'm the dean of student development here at Tri-County. Part of my job is making sure that Tri-County is supporting you appropriately to be successful. We know that many of our students have life obligations and other priorities than their academic work. We also know that our students have different educational goals. Some students are working towards a transfer degree while others are getting a credential to move directly into the workforce. I want to talk with you today about your experience at Tri-County. I'm interested in learning what your student experience has been, whether that is positive or negative. I particularly want to talk about those things that help you stay at the College and those things that compete with your attention to your classwork.

Ground Rules

So that our discussion today can be beneficial and productive, I want to lay down a few ground rules to guide our discussion.

- First, know that all the information you share today is confidential. What is said in here shouldn't be shared with other individuals. I will not share any information you provide today in a way that can be identified with you specifically.
- Everyone will have the opportunity to share. Please don't talk over one another.
- Let's value each other's contribution. It's Ok to disagree with someone else and what they are saying, but this is not the place for arguing points. Each person's experience is different and will be respected in this space.

- This is not the opportunity to discuss any type of grievance or personal problem. I am more than willing to talk with anyone individually about an issue or problem you're dealing with. This is not the appropriate setting to do that
- You can stop your participation in this focus group at any time. Simply let me know that you want to leave, and you will be free to do so.

Focus Group Questions

Opening	1. Let's start with introductions. Please share your name, your major, and what you enjoy doing when you're not at Tri-County.
Introduction	2. Why did you agree to participate in this focus group?
Transition	3. Tell me about your experience at Tri-County.
	4. Talk to me about how you spend time at Tri-County?
	a. Do you come to campus for classes?
	b. Are you involved in student organizations or attend student events?
Key	5. What challenges have you experienced that have impacted your classwork?
	6. Who or what supports you as you complete your classwork?
	7. Have you ever thought about leaving Tri-County?
	a. What made you decide to stay?
	b. If you did leave and come back, what made you leave? What changed that you decided to come back?
	8. What does Tri-County do to help you be successful?
	a. What specific program or service do you find helpful?
	b. What specific program or service is not helpful?
	9. What would you like to see Tri-County do in the future to help you be successful?
	10. What is missing from your Tri-County experience?
Ending	11. What other information do you wish to share that I didn't specifically ask about.

Closing

Thank you for your time and the information that you shared today. I want to remind you that the information your shared today will not be shared in such a way as to connect that to you. I appreciate your participation. If you have any questions at a later time about this focus group, please connect with me individually. I hope you have a good rest of the day.

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