

**FROM FAMILY BACKGROUND TO SOCIALIZATION TO POST GRADUATE  
PLANS: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING  
THE MCCARL CENTER FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS**

by

**Allison F. Saras**

Bachelor of Arts, Pennsylvania State University, 2006

Master of Arts in Public Administration, Villanova University, 2009

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This dissertation was presented

by

Allison F. Saras

It was defended on

July 18, 2016

and approved by

William Bickel, Professor Emeritus, Administrative and Policy Studies

Sherry Brown, Emeritus Director of the McCarl Center, College of General Studies

Linda DeAngelo, Assistant Professor, Administrative and Policy Studies

Father Richard M. Jacobs, Professor, Public Administration, Villanova University

Advisor: Michael Gunzenhauser, Associate Professor, Administrative and Policy Studies

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This case study examines the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success at the University of Pittsburgh and studies how the socialization processes of nontraditional undergraduate students' influences their plans, career and academic, upon graduation. Within the study, my research questions focus on how the individual attributes and family background, socialization processes (interaction, integration and learning), normative contexts (majors, peer groups and co-curriculum) and personal communities (family, friends and employers) contribute and influence a nontraditional student's motivations and aspirations upon graduation. The conceptual framework used to structure this study was Vincent Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration theory and John Weidman's (1984, 1989) socialization model. To study this particular phenomenon, I used a case study (Yin, 2013) as my methodological approach and the tool for collecting my data was phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2013). I conducted 19 personal interviews with nontraditional students associated with the McCarl Center at the University of Pittsburgh. After analyzing the interview data collected, I found that nontraditional students have individualized situations that influence their socialization processes on and off

campus and the aspirations to continue onto graduate study is a strong and likely possibility. However, after graduation nontraditional students first want to enter the workforce before enrolling in a graduate study program to ease student debt, gain work experience or to simply take a break from higher education. In conclusion, my study has several implications on today's nontraditional student experience, existing policy and procedures, and the setting in which this study was conducted, the McCarl Center.

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## PREFACE

In 2006 I graduated from the Pennsylvania State University. I was a 21-year old college graduate who had a positive experience both academically and socially at the undergraduate level and was eager to continue my education. Also, I had nothing to lose; I had the opportunity to take a financial risk and except for having a full-time job, the only other responsibility I had was taking care of myself. I complained often (and to whoever would listen) about the rigorous class load and challenging curriculum at my graduate school, Villanova University, until I met Christine. I met Christine through a mutual class and despite the 20-year age gap between the two of us, we became close. I would see her weekly and noticed that she was always prepared for the day's lecture—complete with the assigned articles highlighted in bright yellow and the textbook already opened to the chapter we were covering that class. Finally one day I said to her, “Christine I am envious of you. You are always so on top of things. I am struggling just to keep afloat.” She kindly laughed at me and said, “Ali, if you only knew how much went in to getting my assignments done, let alone on time.” I did not give her comment much thought until I started to get to know her better throughout the semester and she quickly became my idol. She graduated from Temple University just a year prior to starting graduate school. She decided to go back to receive an undergraduate education later in life and after three kids and a husband that was at jeopardy for losing his job. It took a lot for her to make the decision to continue onto graduate school. She once told me,

After I went back for a bachelor's, I was hungry for more education. I knew how much I could do in this world, how much I could provide for my family and the career opportunities that would exist...if I just kept educating myself. Despite all of the obstacles, challenges and time I would give up with my children, an education would always be worth it.

I was impressed and it always has left a lasting memory in my mind. She would give up so much and work so hard for one dream...to be educated.

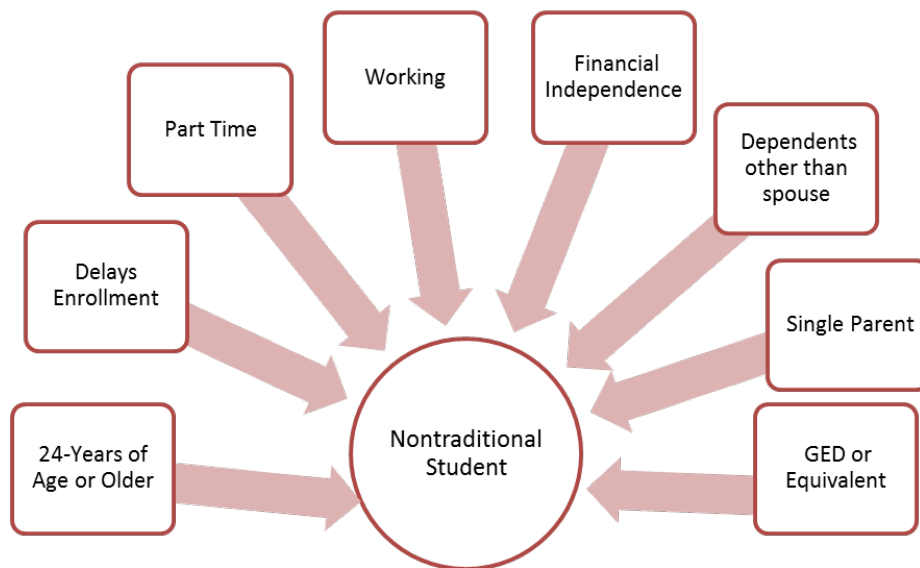
## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This study investigates nontraditional students who have similar stories like Christine and explores how their undergraduate experiences, both academically and socially, made an impact on their plans upon graduation, including but not limited to consideration of graduate study. In addition to my own experiences and interest in this particular population, Sherry Brown (2002) notes only a few studies have investigated retention for nontraditional students and there are very limited numbers of programs on college campuses to aid the development and persistence of these particular students. Nontraditional students at the undergraduate level are the fastest growing population and in a report by the United States Department of Education (2015), nontraditional students make up almost half of the student body on college campuses today. In order to better serve this growing, diverse group of students, this study is intended to explore nontraditional student experiences and socialization processes at the undergraduate level and identify their ambitions and motivations upon graduation.

### **1.1 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

This Chapter begins with defining the characteristics of the nontraditional undergraduate student body. As Choy (2002) emphasizes, the traditional student - one who graduates with a high

school diploma, enrolls in college immediately after high school, relies on his or her parents for financial support and works part-time, if at all, during the academic year is starting to become the minority on college campuses rather than the majority. The terms listed in Appendix A are useful when trying to understand the realm of nontraditional students and the important characteristics that shape this specific student body in higher education today. For the purpose of my study, I have adopted Choy's definition and characteristics of nontraditional students and use these characteristics as a parameter for my sample.



**Figure 1. Choy's Characteristics of the Nontraditional Student**

According to Choy, nontraditional students typically share one or more of the aforementioned characteristics found in Figure 1: 24-years of age or older, delays enrollment, part-time student, working full-time, financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent and has a GED or some other high school certification. The next

section provides more information on these characteristics and establishes their relevancy for this study.

Discussed further in Section 1.8 and in my review of the literature outlined in Chapter 2, I use Weidman's (1989) socialization model as the theoretical foundation to understanding the nontraditional student population and their plans post-graduation. The term, socialization, can be defined as, "the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (Brim, 1966, p. 3). Furthermore, in order to understand the socialization processes of students, Weidman's (1989) framework reflects and conceptualizes the series of experiences and processes occurring prior, during and after a student completes his or her undergraduate degree (Weidman, DeAngelo & Bethea, 2014). These experiences are both intra-and-interpersonal and occur both on and off campus with stakeholders outside of the college institution also playing a factor in the socialization process.

## **1.2 THE EVOLUTION OF THE TERM "NONTRADITIONAL"**

While there is no exact time when the phrase "nontraditional" was accepted in higher education terminology, Ross-Gordon (2011) mentions the work of Patricia Cross and her book, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning* (1981). Ross-Gordon states that Cross's work is when terms such as adult student, lifelong learning and mature student were first referred to as nontraditional. In the 1980s, the burgeoning field of lifelong learning created an influx of books, articles and reports on adult students and their nontraditional study. From there

the term nontraditional began to expand beyond the broad characteristic of the adult student learner and started to embrace not-so-traditional situations (working full-time, enrolling part-time, etc.) as explained by Choy (2002). Even in today's nontraditional student literature, Choy's characteristics are the most frequently cited.

There is an increase in adult participation in higher education and there are several external forces (both societal and economical) such as technological changes and demands from the work force that started to shift the educational aspirations of adults (Cross, 1981). Ross-Gordon (2011) posits that more than 20 years ago this was groundbreaking research for nontraditional education. Cross recognized that nontraditional students were the new demographic on college campuses and that this was an important demographic to further explore. Contemporarily, this discussion of who nontraditional students are and what qualities and characteristics contribute to their experiences on campus still holds relevancy today. The focus on professionals as returning students in higher education is a relatively new concept in the literature of nontraditional students and, as a result, the quality and accessibility for effective student service and intervention is limited.

### **1.3 THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PROFILE**

The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that in the fall of 2011 there were 17.6 million people enrolled in college in the United States (See Jinkens, 2012). Out of those 17.6 million people, 15% were enrolled in 4-year institutions and living on campus, 37% attended classes part-time, and 32% worked while going to school. In addition, out of 17.6 million



people, 42% were enrolled in 2-year institutions and more than a third were over 25 years of age, and a quarter were over 30 years of age. Nearly half of the students identified in the 2011 report were in fact nontraditional. As the data demonstrate, the “traditional” college student who receives a high school diploma, enrolls in college directly after graduation, depends financially on his or her parents is no longer the norm (Jinkens, 2012, Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Nontraditional students are the fastest growing population and can be considered the most diverse (Brown, 2002). In the past, the term nontraditional held a negative connotation and the students were often referred to as the minority on college campuses (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). However, more recently on college campuses nontraditional students are almost 50% of the population and this statistic continues to increase each year (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2012). It is evident that the gap in proportion between traditional and nontraditional students is continuing to become smaller each year.

In the past, nontraditional students were classified only by their race, gender or socioeconomic status (Ogren, 2003). While these aspects are important characteristics for a student’s identity and are relevant research topics in higher education, they are rarely used in the more recent literature as defining characteristics of nontraditional students. As the definition has evolved over time, the most common characteristic of a nontraditional student is anyone 24 years of age or older and enrolled part-time (Choy, 2002). Often, these two characteristics are mentioned in the literature as the only characteristics to determine a student’s nontraditional status (Benekos, Merlo & Cook, 1998; Wyatt, 2011). However, Choy (2002) reports that in addition to age and part-time enrollment, six other characteristics define a nontraditional undergraduate, which are outlined in Figure 1.

### **1.3.1 Degrees of Nontraditional**

Notably, there are also varying degrees of nontraditional status. Nontraditional students can either be minimally, moderately or highly nontraditional (Choy, 2002). If a student is minimally nontraditional, he or she has only one characteristic of nontraditional status. The most common example of a student being minimally nontraditional is either being older in age or enrolled part-time in a program. If a student is moderately nontraditional, he or she has two or three characteristics of nontraditional status. The most common example of a student being moderately nontraditional is when he or she is older, independent and enrolled in a part-time program. And finally, if a student is highly nontraditional, he or she has at least four or more characteristics of nontraditional status. There are a variety of combined attributes that defines a student as highly nontraditional. One combination that appears most frequently in the literature is a single parent, older, working full-time, enrolled part-time in a program and financially independent.

## **1.4 GRADUATE EDUCATION**

Since my research involves discovering the impact of the undergraduate experience and socialization processes on nontraditional students' motivations and ambitions upon graduation, including graduate study, this section explains the subject of graduate education in the United States and the reasons why students decide to enroll in graduate programs (both master and doctorate-level programs) each year. Enrollment in graduate school is on the incline. According

to the Projections of Education Statistics to 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013), there was an increase of 63% between 1996-1997 and 2009-2010 of people who received master degrees, and the number is projected to increase by 34% in the 2021-2022 academic year. In addition, the total number of doctoral degrees increased 34% between 1996-1997 and 2009-2010 and the number is projected to increase by 12% by 2021-2022.

There are many dimensions to a student's decision to enter graduate school and some of the most reoccurring and practical themes in the research literature are career placement (Stolzenberg, 1994), economic opportunities (Day & Newburger, 2002) and personal satisfaction (Baird, 1976). As the literature suggests, deciding to go to graduate school is something that is considered over a long period of time. This type of decision requires planning and is a voluntary action (Stolzenber, 1994). The process can be described as a "multistage decision process affected by a variety of factors involving the student's characteristics, information gathering, college actions and college/program characteristics" (Kallio, 1995, p. 110). Other scholars in the field call it a multidimensional, complex decision (Ethington, Smart, 1986; Stoecker, 1991). Stoecker (1991) suggests that the decision is complex because of "multidimensional concerns of ability, income, expense, employment, and possibly inestimable opportunity costs that are not present for the undergraduate student" (p. 690). Those seeking graduate education need to make a well-thought-out decision to invest time, money and resources into a rigorous academic program. Therefore, pursuing a graduate degree is a major, life-changing decision and it is one to be managed with careful consideration.

Students pursue master, doctorate and professional degrees to achieve their ultimate career goals (Baird, 1976). While pursuing a graduate education, an individual is becoming an expert in the field and preparing to successfully enter the profession they were trained for

(Stolzenber, 1994). The more specialized a person is in the field, just as an example, engineering or the health sciences, the more knowledgeable they are about his or her subject area. Also, one of the main reasons why students pursue a graduate degree is to qualify for a profession they desire (Stoecker, 1991). Positions such as a full-time faculty member, lawyer or doctor require a certain level of education and certain level of credentials. As Liang Zhang (2005) frames graduate education, “Usually it is a prerequisite to many desirable and prestigious professions with great economic rewards and high social status” (p. 315). And finally, the higher level of education a person acquires, the more opportunity lies before them (Rovaris, 2006). Through graduate programs, students not only have the ability to learn in the classroom, but they have the opportunity to network with people and even alumni associated in the same field and participate in hands-on experiences. Therefore, receiving a graduate education is a great tool to achieve occupational aspirations and to give a student a competitive advantage in the job market.

Receiving a graduate education is an invaluable way for a person to achieve professional success. However, in this challenging economy, a graduate education does not only help with gaining high-level positions, it allows people the opportunity to change career paths or ensure continued employment (Wendler, Bridgeman, Cline, Millett, Rock, Bell & McAllister, 2010). Those looking to change careers or secure positions in their current careers are sometimes classified as nontraditional or professional students. They are defined as such because they spent time in the workforce and did not enter a graduate program directly upon college graduation (Stoecker, 1991). The Council of Graduate Schools (2007) reported that there has been a rapid increase in the number of graduate students in the 40-plus age group. This report attributed the increase in numbers to the fact that many employers are encouraging their workers to go back to school to improve their skills later in life. In a study done in 2006 by the International

Foundation of Employee Benefits (2007), out of the 226 companies that were surveyed, 94% offered some type of tuition remission. Thus, graduate education is not only a key resource for gaining access into a field or achieving a high-level position. It is also way for nontraditional or professional students to change career paths, secure positions or sharpen their skill sets.

In addition to career opportunities and placement, the more educated a person is the better chance he or she has earning higher levels of income (McMahon & Wagner, 1981). According to Day and Newburger (2002) in a report submitted for the U.S. Census Bureau, each additional degree a person obtains is associated with an increase in average salary. Furthermore, it is projected that the median annual salary for those who hold a bachelor degree is \$70,400; with a master degree \$66,420 and with a doctorate \$100,490 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Although surprising, the statistics show those with a bachelor's degree earn more than those graduates with a master's degree in 2015. McMahon and Wagner (1981) mention in their article that students who earn graduate degrees do not expect to receive a higher initial salary than those who just completed a bachelor degree, but they do expect their annual salaries to increase more rapidly over time. Therefore, the higher levels of education a person receives, the more he or she anticipates a higher level of income per year, over time than those who are not as educated.

Also, people apply to graduate school for the simple fact of wanting to further their education or they have certain academic aspirations. As Baird (1976) frames it, "students who value the academic way of life, with its particular demands for excellence, are attracted to graduate school" (p. 26). Some students simply have a passion for higher education and excel in learning environments. Some students enter their undergraduate careers knowing that they will not terminate their education after graduation (Eide & Waehrer, 1998). These are the type of

students who know at the undergraduate level that they have a desire to pursue post-baccalaureate degrees regardless of their experience during college. Liang Zhang (2005) states, “these individuals have deep interest in a particular subject matter and consider graduate education as a consumption good” (p. 315). Whether it is for one’s own satisfaction or triumph, receiving a graduate or professional degree is a personal feat.

Students also pursue advanced degrees because of the growing demand for specialized education. It is expected that from 2008 to 2018, 2.5 million new jobs will require some type of graduate degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The undergraduate market is becoming saturated (Mullen, Goyette & Soares, 2003). It is almost as if receiving a bachelor degree is the norm in today’s society. Rovaris (2006) explains further that “graduate school is fast becoming an entry-level requirement for many of the more desirable academic and other professional positions” (p. 65). While there is a personal desire to continue he or she’s own education, there is almost a demand to do so in order to make a student more marketable in the job market upon graduation.

As indicated earlier, graduate education can be beneficial for a student in terms of career preparation, academic integration, and personal advancement – all practical factors in deciding to go to graduate school. However, understanding why some nontraditional students do and do not enter postbaccalaureate study upon undergraduate education is a valuable question researchers in the field are still trying to comprehend today. Where traditional and nontraditional students resemble one another is with the desire to advance oneself. However, to what extent nontraditional students’ undergraduate experiences influence their desire to enroll in graduate school takes its root as the foundation of this study.

## 1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are several assumptions that can be made from the aforementioned statistics for nontraditional undergraduate students. One, the nontraditional student population is projected to someday surpass the number of traditional students on campuses (Choy, 2002). Two, this population is very diverse, with many characteristics making them “nontraditional.” And finally, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) projects that by 2019, the percentage of those over 25 years-old on college campuses will increase by approximately 30%, making the undergraduate population older in age. The problem with the shift in demographics at the undergraduate level is questioning whether or not colleges and universities are equipped to deal with such rapid and profound changes (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

The second problem with the increase in numbers for nontraditional students is that according to the data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), nontraditional students are twice as likely to drop out of college during their first year of school. This study examines the extent that administrators and faculty members are preparing and encouraging their students to not only continue on to graduation, but also to pursue a graduate education. The problem lies not in the fact that nontraditional students need to be engaged, but they need to be engaged differently both academically and socially in order to meet their unique needs. Thus, only a minimal number of university and colleges across the country have picked up on this trend and have created programs designed to specifically help nontraditional students become better acquainted with college environments, help with financial aid and even create centers for veterans to assist with the transitions back to civilian life.

Finally, exploring the option of graduate education with the nontraditional population is a unique focus because with this certain population, administrators and faculty may need a specialized approach to encouraging graduate study with their students in order to make advanced study more appealing to this specific demographic. Brown (2002) states that it is not only the programs that make students succeed but rather their “academic integration” in and outside of the classroom. Brown states, “if nontraditional students perceive their educational outcomes to represent a fair exchange of time, effort and money invested, they will be more committed to staying at that particular institution” (p. 1). Thus, another issue with the nontraditional population lies in the area of faculty and staff integration and what administrators are doing to intrigue students academically. As Brown (2002) explains, very few studies exist regarding the retention for nontraditional students, and there is a significant gap in the research pertaining to graduate education, not just lacking with nontraditional students but the realm of graduate education as a whole. I am interested to investigate not only the nontraditional undergraduate experience and how academic and social integration and institutional resources play a factor in retention, but also nontraditional students’ ambitions and motivations upon graduation and if these aspirations include enrolling in a graduate study program.

## **1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

My study aimed to answer five research questions that were identified in my literature review and are listed below. Each of the questions were developed and designed to: identify the theoretical construct in my study (nontraditional students, graduate study and socialization



processes), transcend my data, identify my study's contribution to the understanding of the theoretical construct and help create robust, valid and valuable results (Foss & Waters, 2007). These questions served as the foundation of my research and were used as the ultimate guide during the data collection process.

1. How do nontraditional students' individual attributes and family background influence their views on higher education (i.e. background, predispositions, preparation)?
2. What are the socialization processes (interaction, integration, and learning) that nontraditional students go through during their undergraduate experiences?
3. What normative contexts (majors, peer groups, co-curriculum) do students describe as relevant to their socialization at the undergraduate-level and aspirations upon graduation?
4. How do nontraditional students' personal communities (family, friends, and employers) contribute to their socialization at the undergraduate level and aspirations upon graduation?
5. What are nontraditional students' motivations and aspirations for future plans upon graduation?

## **1.7 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to examine the undergraduate experiences and socialization processes of nontraditional students and identify factors that influence their ambitions and motivations to not only pursue graduate education but also other career and academic paths. Through my case study I created a working collection of references and data that will help

inform higher education practices and policy as well as offer insights into how to serve nontraditional students more effectively.

I executed a study that examined the undergraduate nontraditional student experience through the case study methodology. Since I was looking at a particular demographic, nontraditional students, at a particular institution, the University of Pittsburgh, this method was the most appropriate for my study. Furthermore, in order to gather valid and reliable data, I conducted 17 phenomenological interviews and through the use of open-ended questions, this technique created a dialogue that allowed myself, the researcher, and the participants to explore many different facets of the nontraditional student phenomenon not limited to only the questions outlined in my interview protocol. The interview process explored how background, normative contexts, integration, interactions and learning all played a role in students' undergraduate experience and how their socialization outcomes influenced post-graduation plans, and if applicable, attitudes in regards to graduate education. Since the nontraditional college experience can be challenging, I investigated nontraditional students' ambitions and motivations to continue onto graduate school – looking at graduate school as a vehicle for upward mobility in society.

In my research I used a sample of students to participate in my study from the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success. This co-curriculum program shed light on how this specific organization influences nontraditional students at the undergraduate level. In other words, I examine how the McCarl Center influences nontraditional students both in formal and informal settings and examine how socialization outcomes, “the resultant changes (values, beliefs and knowledge) that occur in students” impact nontraditional students' post-graduation plans both academic and professional (Weidman, 2006, p. 256).

## 1.8 INTRODUCTION TO CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

When first considering my conceptual framework for my study, Vincent Tinto's (1975, 1993) landmark student integration theory seemed the most appropriate. However, after reviewing the critiques of Tinto's theory, his theory is most appropriate when studying four-year, traditional college age students, and since my study examines nontraditional students, I ultimately turned to John Weidman's (1984, 1989) broad student socialization model as a way to understand nontraditional student socialization and outcomes at the undergraduate level. The evolution of the development of my theoretical framework is explained below.

Tinto (1993) created a theoretical model for student dropout or departure. His model states that students persist at the undergraduate level because of social and academic integration at the university. The more involved a student is both socially and academically, the more satisfied a student is with his or her college experience, and in return, the more likely a student is to persist to graduation. According to Tinto, integration is socially determined by a student's relationships with faculty and peers and integration relies on grades and academic performance.

One of the main critiques of Tinto's model is that it primarily refers to undergraduate integration for traditional students who are 18-22 years of age and attend a four-year institution. As a result of this criticism, I turn to John Weidman's student socialization theory for a broader approach. Weidman (1985) wrote an article titled, "Retention of Nontraditional Students in Postsecondary Education," where he used two case studies to examine retention amongst nontraditional students enrolled at a four-year institution and nontraditional students enrolled in a postsecondary nondegree vocational training program. When assessing the nontraditional

students in the vocational training program, Weidman explored the appropriateness of applying Tinto's (1975) student integration theory to this specific sample. As a result, Weidman found:

Approaches and conceptual frameworks for studying retention that are derived from research on traditional college students can provide appropriate points of departure for understanding retention among non-traditional, adult students. It also suggests modifications and extensions that might be made in order to adapt the traditional approaches to some of the particular problems of non-traditional students in postsecondary education, especially as they relate to the demands faced by independent adult students coping with personal responsibilities and financial contingencies in addition to academic coursework. (p. 13).

Therefore, similar to Weidman's thinking, I started with looking at Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration theory since there were appropriate points of Tinto's theory – social and academic theory – that fit my study. However, as Weidman (1985) suggests, I needed to find current literature and a broader theoretical approach that could also address the external commitments and responsibilities of nontraditional students outside of the collegiate experience.

While Weidman's model touches upon interaction and integration, the student socialization theory also takes into account the student's experiences prior to entering college, during college and after he or she has graduated from their respective institutions. For instance, his model incorporates *prospective students* and considers socioeconomic status, aptitude, career preferences, and aspirations and values prior to entering college. Weidman's model also incorporates *normative contexts*, similarly to Tinto's (1993) theory, and includes academic integration (formal and informal interactions and relationships in the classroom and with faculty and staff) and also social integration (formal and informal relationships with peers and integration with campus activities, programs and organizations). Next, Weidman (1989) also incorporates in his model non-college reference groups which includes peers, employers and community organizations. This aspect of his model was appealing to my study since external

factors were important to consider when understanding nontraditional students' plans post-graduation. Lastly, Weidman also incorporates socialization outcomes in his model which entails career choices, lifestyle preferences, aspirations and values. Again, also significant to my study when examining how the undergraduate experience impacts a nontraditional student's plans post-graduation. Each of these broad areas of thought included in Weidman's socialization model help to shape my research questions to better understand how college influences, in addition to internal and external factors, a nontraditional student's decision to pursue graduate study, if not, alternative paths they have considered.

It is important to note that no study has ever been done regarding the nontraditional undergraduate experience and its effects on the career and academic plans upon graduation. It is my hope that my research will add to the schools of thought of both Tinto (1993) and Weidman (1989) by looking at how the undergraduate student socialization and experiences influence a nontraditional students' plans post-graduation, while also examining a demographic that is underrepresented in literature.

## **1.9 SIGNIFICANCE TO THE PROBLEM**

Educators who work in the American higher education enterprise have a responsibility to be well-informed concerning the needs of various stakeholders. The literature indicates that in regard to nontraditional students, the following statements are true:

- More nontraditional students are graduating with bachelor degrees (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2012).

- The undergraduate market is becoming saturated (Mullen, Goyette & Soares, 2003).
- Graduate education is often motivated by status attainment, which highlights occupational, status, and social advancement as motivating factors (Bozick, Entwisle, Dauber & Kerr, 2010).

By conducting individual interviews with nontraditional students at the University of Pittsburgh, I was able to take a more personal approach to comprehending the experiences of these students and understanding the context of their lives on campus. As such, my study provides context about current nontraditional students' experience in college today. My research sheds light on nontraditional students and how their undergraduate experiences influence their plans post-graduation. Since a study like this has never been done before, I aim to add awareness to the field of higher education and hopefully in turn prompt necessary changes to policy, procedures and the culture at universities and college campuses.

## **1.10 AN OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION**

The first chapter of this dissertation is an introduction to the problem space surrounding nontraditional students and context for the study. The next chapter provides a working review of the literature in this problem space, followed by Chapter three, which identifies the methods used to collect data. Chapter four presents the results that came from the data I collected and to conclude, Chapter five includes a discussion of the results in regards to the literature and my research questions, and Chapter six outlines the limitations to my study as well as recommendations for future research.

## **2.0 A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In this Chapter, I review literature with regard to my conceptual framework and the common themes from prior research pertaining to nontraditional students. These themes include, but are not limited to, academic and social integration, peer groups and co-curriculum impacts, personal communities, individual attributes and commitment to and/or by the institution of higher education. I also describe the criticisms to my framework (Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1984, 1989) found in the literature. One particular criticism to Tinto's model is that his targeted demographic only applies to traditional students who enroll in four-year institutions, are 18-22 years of age and attend college directly after high school graduation. As a result, this Chapter also explains why criticisms of Tinto (1993) prompted me to turn to John Weidman's (1984, 1989) broader socialization model as a more appropriate fit for my sample of nontraditional students. Finally, in this Chapter I demonstrate gaps in the current research and how my study adds to the ongoing literature concerning nontraditional students and their undergraduate experiences.

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION TO TINTO AND WEIDMAN**

After exploring both Vincent Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration theory and John Weidman's (1984, 1989) student socialization model, I have decided for many reasons to work

from and build upon both areas of thought. First, I refer to Vincent Tinto's integration model because pioneers in the field of nontraditional students, like Sherry Brown (2002) for example, continue to reference Tinto as an indicator of integration and success for nontraditional students. Tinto (1993) explains that students persist at the undergraduate level because of social and academic integration at a university. The more involved a student is both socially and academically, the more satisfied a student is with his or her college experience and this is a strong indicator of persistence to graduation.

The reason I first turned to Tinto's (1993) model was to help understand not only nontraditional students' persistence to graduation but also how their academic and social integration propels them to consider certain academic and career paths after college. Ethington and Smart (1986) state the more satisfied students are with their undergraduate experience –both academically and socially - the more inclined they will be to enroll in a graduate program. The main objective of Ethington and Smart's study was to examine the process of a student deciding to enroll in graduate school and to test if a student's level of commitment to the educational process influenced his or her decision to pursue a graduate degree. They used data from the Corporative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) sponsored by the American Council on Education and the University of California, Los Angeles. The data included approximately 6,000 students who were surveyed during their first year of study and then again nine years later. Ethington and Smart found a strong correlation between a student's undergraduate academic and social involvement and his or her decision to enroll in graduate school. They were the first scholars to use Tinto's (1975) model to understand why a student decides to enroll in graduate studies beyond the already existing atheoretical and descriptive analyses.



A more recent study, by Mattern and Radunzel (2015), builds on the already existing literature relating to graduate school enrollment patterns. Mattern and Radunzel studied approximately 14,000 bachelor degree recipients who took the ACT (American College Testing) exam during their senior year of high school and explored their attitudes in regard to graduate education. In addition to Ethington and Smart (1986), Matter and Radunzel (2015) found the following to be true about graduate school enrollment:

- Students who scored high on their ACT tests were more likely to go onto graduate school;
- Students who elected to take advanced courses in high school were more likely to be prepared for college and therefore, more likely to enroll in graduate school;
- Aspirations and motivations are a key factor for students enrolling in graduate school;
- Students who graduated college within four-years or less were more likely to enroll in graduate school;
- Racial and minority groups are an area for further study in regards to graduate school enrollment. (pp. 20-23).

Thus, evidence suggests the undergraduate experience plays a significant role in student persistence to college graduation but also an important role if a student decides to persist beyond postsecondary education.

One of the most notable critiques of Tinto's (1993) student integration model is that he focuses primarily on traditional students, 18-22 years of age, enrolled in four-year institutions directly after high school (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Brunsdon, Davies, Shevlin & Bracken, 2000). Several studies examine if Tinto's model remains relevant beyond the traditional student and if

Tinto's model holds true with minority students, nontraditional students and even students with disabilities. Swail (2003) believes that not one model can be applied to all students who enroll in the complex system of higher education. Swail states, "It is important to keep in mind that the human condition is far too complex – as is our system for post-secondary education – to definitely prove the validity of one psychological or sociological theoretical model over another" (p. 50). Mattern and Radunzel (2015) also mention that their study primarily looks at young adults and it "is unclear whether the study findings generalize to those for the entire population of graduate school enrollees, a group that also includes older adults who return to school for a post-baccalaureate degree after being in the workforce for some time" (p. 22). In conclusion, research pertaining to nontraditional students and graduate study enrollment is lacking in the current literature.

Tinto's (1993) concepts are not entirely appropriate for the diverse nontraditional student population, and as a result, the more suitable approach to examine this phenomenon is to consider a broader conceptual framework – the student socialization model. John Weidman (1989) explains student integration on college campuses in a different way, through socialization. Similarly to Tinto (1993), Weidman (1989) suggests that, "socialization occurs through processes of interpersonal interaction, learning, and social integration" (p. 256). As cited by Weidman, the definition of socialization is "the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society" (Brim, 1966, p. 256). Weidman's (1989) states that socialization also develops from many different domains, such as cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Participating simultaneously in multiple social groups and structures on campus can help shape a student's identity. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) state that Weidman's student socialization theory is

unique because it “incorporates academic environments, normative contexts and the socialization process of academic environments and institutions” (p. 256). Therefore, I use the Weidman model of undergraduate socialization to understand nontraditional students’ social and academic integration and how these undergraduate experiences influence post-college plans.

There are two streams of literature pertaining to Weidman’s (1989) student socialization framework. First is the developmental perspective of personal environment and interaction (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004), and second is the college impact perspective that suggest socialization with diverse peer groups during the undergraduate experience (Weidman, 1989). Both streams of research are important to my dissertation study because I examine not only how the personal environment of the McCarl Center and student interactions influence students’ college experiences, but also the diversity of peer groups that nontraditional students interact with both on and off campus. Peer groups can refer to family, friends and employers, and Weidman, DeAngelo and Bethea (2014) mention, “During college, students continue to remain in periodic contact with, and are influenced by significant others outside their higher education institutions, such as parents, other relatives, and friends” (p. 44). Therefore, institutions of higher education should not be thought of as encapsulated environments and outside factors such as family, friends, employers and community groups should be considered as an influential forces as well. Kaufman and Feldman (2004) add that the student socialization model explains how a student can develop and change during their undergraduate experience from not only his or her on-campus interactions and integration but also simultaneously through external relationships with colleagues, employers and family.

As stated by Antonio (2004), Weidman makes three main points in regards to interpersonal processes in socialization. First, the “socialization process is quite dependent on

interpersonal interaction and the sentimental intensity of the relationship associated with the interaction” (Antonio, 2004, p. 452). Second, Weidman “notes the frequency of the interactions” (p. 452). And finally, Weidman also underscores “that the long-term academic impacts of college are not the result of classroom experiences, but of informal forms of interaction with students and faculty” (p. 452). As demonstrated through my own study, organizations such as the McCarl Center can provide diversity through peer groups and co-curriculums which provide the student with the opportunity to have a positive undergraduate experience through interactions and integration. In summary, Weidman’s (1989) model can be described via the processes below:

1. Enters college as a freshman with certain values, aspirations and other personal goals;
2. Is exposed to various socializing influences while attending college, including normative pressures exerted via (a) social relationships with college faculty and peers, (b) parental pressures, and (c) involvement with noncollege reference groups;
3. Assesses the salience of the various normative pressures encountered for attaining personal goals; and
4. Changes or maintains those values, aspirations, and personal goals that were held at college entrance. (Weidman, DeAngelo, & Bethea, 2014, pp. 44-45)

Also, Weidman’s model (1989) examines parental socialization and student background characteristics. Weidman (1984) states, “Since the effects of parental socialization are so very likely to persist during the course of the student’s college years, parental pressures and expectations may serve to mediate the impact of college experiences” (p. 302). However, Weidman also explains that parental socialization decreases throughout the undergraduate experience and by, “senior year the correlations between parental characteristics and career

choices are no longer significant” (p. 302). Although modest, Weidman’s study also found correlations between a student’s career preference when entering college and parental socioeconomic status and life-style. In addition to parental socialization, characteristics of a student’s background also are contributing sources to the undergraduate socialization process. Characteristics include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic status, parents’ education and aptitude in regards to a student’s academic ability, often measured by standardized test scores (SAT, ACT).

In addition to how college affects a student’s undergraduate experience, other important aspects to review when considering my theoretical framework are career and degree aspirations and motivations. Antonio (2004) examined how aspirations and motivations differed between different racial and ethnic groups through the use of Weidman’s (1989) socialization model. Through his study, Antonio (2004) found for students of color that, “In the realm of self-concept and aspirations, diversity may simply provide students – students of color – a normative context which contains more varied reference points from which to evaluate themselves” (p. 465). In addition, Antonio’s study also revealed that, “peer factors that influence students’ intellectual self- confidence and degree aspirations operate differently by race” (p. 464). In addition to Antonio, Carter (1999) also examined socialization between African-American students and white students and the difference of impact of inter-and-intrapersonal relationships have on degree aspirations. Carter states, “Theoretical models of African-American and white students should be tested separately for each group because African-American and white students being college with different background, attend different types of intuitions and have different experiences in college” (p. 259). Each line of research is important to my study because in addition to Antonio’s (2004) and Carter’s (1999) references to minority groups and socialization

processes, nontraditional students are another unique population on college campuses that need to be studied. Weidman (1984) also agrees, stating, “In the case of nontraditional students, especially those older than their early twenties, there may be competing demands of employers and the students own families at home” (p. 303). Therefore, the specific demographic of nontraditional students’ needs to be examined further and in more depth.

In conclusion, based on the critiques of Tinto’s (1993) student integration theory and turning to Weidman’s (1984, 1989) holistic approach, I adapted a framework that is most appropriate for describing this type of phenomenon in nontraditional student research. Weidman, DeAngelo and Bethea (2014), state, “The Weidman model can be used flexibly and adapted for studying impacts of multiples aspects of the college experience, especially since results do not follow a singular patter, but rather vary according to the dimensions under consideration” (p. 49). And therefore, as Weidman, DeAngelo and Bethea suggest, a holistic model is flexible and can be adapted to examine diverse student populations.

## **2.2 COMMON THEMES OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

There are several key themes I have synthesized from the literature pertaining to nontraditional students. As mentioned, the two overlapping (and most common) characteristics of nontraditional students are that they are older in age and are enrolled part-time in an undergraduate program for at least one semester in an academic year (Choy, 2002). Also, if a student is at least 24 years of age, the student is considered nontraditional and is sometimes labeled as an adult student, returning learner, re-entering or mature student (Benshoff, 1993;

Choy, 2002; Toynton, 2005). According to the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, in 2008 more than one-third of students enrolling in undergraduate programs were over the age of 24, and it is predicted that the population of adult students will grow ten times more than traditional students by 2018 (as cited in Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoop, 2007).

Older students return to college for several different reasons: switching jobs, changes in family life, the desire to finish a degree that was started in the past, career advancement or even self-fulfillment (Benshoff, 1993; Hando, 2008). Older students face situations that prevent them from experiencing a traditional education. They often re-enter higher education after taking a significant break from formal education. Another trend in the nontraditional literature is the phenomenon of early retirement (Brown, 2002). This population is a group that opts to retire at an early age and wants to go back to school to prepare for another career. Usually seen among white males, longer life spans and healthier lifestyles make people want to continue to work long after the “prime” of their careers. Also, an adult student can have one or more life experiences such as developing a career, having a family or involvement in the community (Benshoff, 1993; Hando, 2008). Benshoff (1993) explains further, an adult student has more “mature” life experiences than his or her younger peers. Since they did not enroll in college directly after high school graduation or they are returning to college later in life, they have had time to pursue other opportunities.

Lastly, a nontraditional student can be defined as someone who has already completed some type of higher education degree but is going back for a second bachelor’s degree or for an advanced degree for the purposes of professional development or to ultimately change career paths (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). As Brown (2002) explains further, “The linear life course –

education, work, retirement – is increasingly rare as people change jobs, retrain voluntarily or involuntarily, and enter the workforce at various times” (p. 67). Thus, nontraditional learners cannot be considered a homogeneous group because each student has his or her own life situation, academic purpose and reason for returning to higher education.

Another commonly cited reason for a person returning to school is divorce or single-parenting (Brown, 2002; Glass & Rose, 1994). According to a report titled *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and their Child Support*, released by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2009, there were approximately 13.7 million single parents in the United States, and those parents are responsible for raising 22 million children (Grall, 2009). Predominately female, these students face many personal and institutional challenges when trying to pursue a degree. Institutional challenges may include “time limits to obtaining a degree, lack of counseling services, few support groups, and limited child care service” (Brown, 2002, p. 67). On the other hand, personal barriers consist of “financial insufficiency, conflicts between home and school roles, lack of time, insecurity and problems of identity resulting from divorce” (p. 67). For a single parent, there are many challenges to their day-to-day activity – childcare, dependable transportation and access to health care – that could affect their success in the classroom.

Also, another recurring theme mentioned in the literature about nontraditional students is their unique perceptions about the value of education and their learning patterns. Robert Jinkens (2009) explains, nontraditional students are not as worried about achieving high grades. While earning high grades is still important, they are more focused on the knowledge they receive from a class and how this new information can be applied to their long-term career. Jinkens interviewed faculty members to learn about their perspective of what defines a nontraditional student. One faculty member responded that “they are more interested in the subject matter.



They come more tired [than their younger peers] but they are a better audience. The younger students, you know, need more prodding” (p. 985). In addition, Linda Wyatt (2011) states, “adult learners spend much more time on academics and subject matter and are highly focused, serious, and more motivated than the traditional college student” (p. 13). Conversely, Cynthia Howell (2001) claims that nontraditional, adult students are not adequately prepared for college-level work, both academically and psychologically. Howell purports that college environments are too challenging for adult students to endure - either because of the challenging curriculum, intense workload or because these students did not receive a high school diploma but rather a General Education Degree (GED). However, a survey done in 2006 by the National Survey for Student Engagement demonstrates that 80% of nontraditional adult learners asked questions in class or contributed to discussions, while only 72% of traditional-age students did so. The survey also determined that 61% of the nontraditional adult students prepared two or more drafts of papers and assignments, while only 40% of traditional-age students’ complete one, final draft to submit. And, only 13% of nontraditional adult learners came to class unprepared with assignments uncompleted compared to the 24% of traditional-age students who were coming to class unprepared with incomplete assignments. Therefore, the survey concludes that nontraditional, adult students successfully perform and excel in college settings. However, the issue of achievement is often contested among scholars today.

Several authors such as James Benshoff (1993), Robert Jinkens (2009) and Lynda Wyatt (2011), have studied older, more mature student because their ambitions, learning styles and every day stressors are much different than their fellow traditionally- aged (18-23 years of age) peers. Often adult students are moderately or highly nontraditional because in addition to being part-time students, they also have families and are working full-time jobs (35-hours per week).

Likewise, Ali Berker, Laura Horn and Dennis Carroll (2003) describe nontraditional students as “adult undergraduate students who combined employment with postsecondary education” (p. 22). They go on to explain that working adult undergraduates can be broken into two groups, “employees who study (those who work fulltime and pursue postsecondary education to obtain skills necessary to advance in their careers) and students who work (those who work part-time and attend school full-time)” (p. 1). Nontraditional students are considered employees whose first responsibility are to work and second are to study. Since nontraditional students can also be described as financially independent (Choy, 2002), working full-time while going to school is not an option rather than a necessity.

Because of work and family obligations, these students are not living on campus, taking classes from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. or have the ability to attend office hours with a professor or administrative personnel during the day (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hando, 2008). Because of time constraints, older students with multiple responsibilities have a hard time “striking a balance between their academic and external commitments that enables them to reach a level of engagement sufficient to achieve academic success” (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 36). Gilardi and Guglielmetti conducted a hierarchical step-wise logistic regression and discovered from their study that nontraditional students attribute more meaning to the learning experience but encounter more difficulties integrating with the university environment and use university services significantly less than traditional students. Nontraditional students have limited flexibility and find getting to campus challenging on days that they are not required to be there or during normal business hours – hence not capitalizing on university resources. Nontraditional students often seek institutions that offer classes at more convenient times that can accommodate both their professional and personal lives (Benekos, Merlo & Cook, 1998). The rise of the older

student who needs to work to support themselves and others has influenced colleges and universities to increase the number of online, evening and weekend classes and also satellite educational programs. Thus, because nontraditional students have many responsibilities in and out of the classroom, they are more likely to look for undergraduate programs that work well with their professional and personal situations.

Nevertheless, as with traditional students pursuing a degree in certain academic fields, the need for graduate or post-baccalaureate education is apparent. In this context, a nontraditional student may prepare for professional schools such as law school, medical school, or veterinarian programs, or wish to pursue a graduate degree in the humanities with aspirations to write, research, and/or teach.

### **2.3 VETERANS AS NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

I include a review of the literature on returning veterans to higher education because some of the participants in my study are student veterans. Under the realm of the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success, the Office of Veteran Services is housed both figuratively (in regards to the Center's organizational chart) and literally (offices are located in the McCarl Center). While being a veteran is not one of Choy's (2002) characteristics of a nontraditional student, many of the veterans I interviewed qualified for at least one of Choy's characteristics of a nontraditional student. The most common veteran profile (from my study) is that a veteran delayed enrollment, was 24-years or older and was financially independent. There is a limited but growing amount of literature on veteran students in today's literature.

Ever since the Federal government passed the GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act) in 1944, veterans have added a diverse population to American university campuses. The creation of the Bill after War World II assisted veterans with low-cost mortgages, low-interest business loans to start businesses and cash payments for tuition and living expenses to attend high school, college or vocational training. In 2009, the GI bill was reformed and the educational benefits in regard to dollar amount allotted for veterans and family members increased. Making education more attractive, close to one million veterans and their families used the GI Bill in 2014 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2014). Furthermore, 45% of all veterans under the age of 30 have pursued a college degree either full or part-time since 2011 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2011). Therefore, a popular method of reintegration for veterans into civilian life is through the system of higher education (Sayor, Noorbaloochi & Frazier, 2010).

Since the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the improvement of the GI Bill post 9/11, there has been the largest influx of veterans enrolling in the higher education system since the Vietnam War era (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). With that being said, it is predicted that universities and colleges will continue to see an incline in enrollment of veterans wanting to pursue life as a civilian and achieve their educational and career aspirations (Church, 2009).

According to Rumann and Hamrick (2010), prior research primarily focused on veterans, higher education and the success of federal assistance programs and not at the individual-level of a veteran transitioning from active duty to civilian life. Student engagement and integration is a predictor of student success in higher education and it has just been of recent that the research on this particular demographic has turned to focus on the adjustment and transition of veterans in the classroom. Thus far, the literature addresses veterans and how their medical diagnoses and

mental health (PTSD) affects their success of not only integrating on college campuses but retention to graduation (Church, 2009), as well as how the Office of Student Veterans and peer counseling can also affect a veteran's integration to not only campus life but civilian life as well. Schultz, Glickman and Eisen's (2014) research has shown the dramatic increase of PTSD and alcohol abuse after returning from service. According to Hoge (2011), on college campuses, "Veterans remain reluctant to seek care, with only 50% of those in need actually seeking treatment and only 40% of them recovering" (p. 549). As a result, studies have shown that there needs to be more of a collaboration between systems of higher education, Veteran Affairs groups and on-campus veterans outreach programs to ensure the mental stability and success of veterans (Church, 2009; McCasin, Leach, Herbst, & Armstrong, 2013).

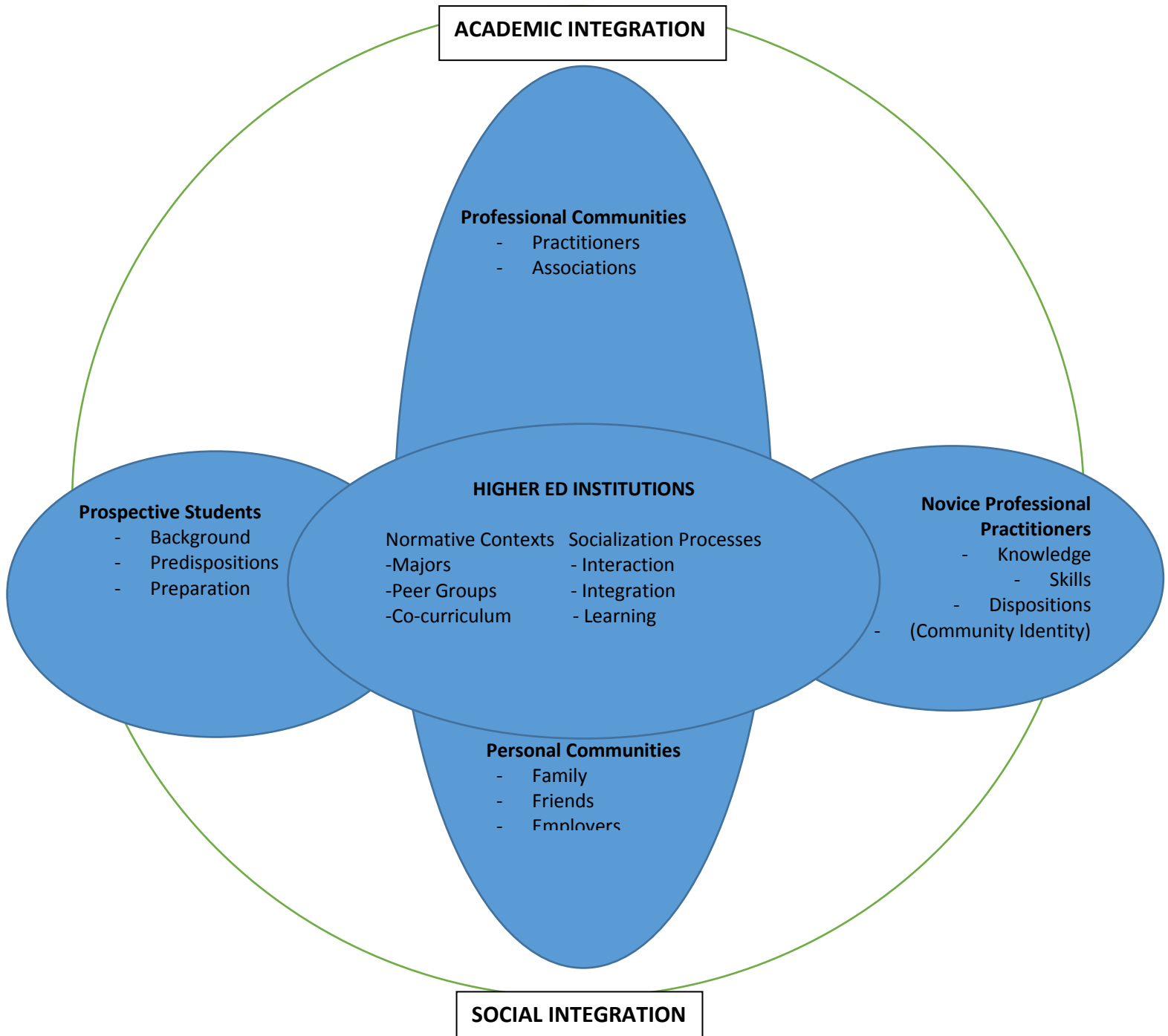
Similar to the literature on nontraditional students, since the student veteran population is growing on college campuses, there is a need for scholars to further examine this specific phenomenon (Church, 2009). There is a gap in the literature that examines the transition and integration of veterans on college campuses and the minimizing of culture clashes (Naphan & Elliot, 2015). Realizing the need for further research, Naphan and Elliot used a qualitative approach and interviewed 11 student veterans returning from service and transitioning to civilian life. They found that task cohesion, military structure, military responsibilities and release anxiety, combat experience and social cohesion in combat units significantly influenced the undergraduate experiences of these student veterans and their transition into the classroom.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From the review of the literature, there have been several key studies that look at nontraditional student retention and socialization at the undergraduate level, but it is my hope to take this line of inquiry a step further by looking at how the nontraditional undergraduate experience and socialization influences their decisions post-graduation, especially inquiring about graduate study. Conceptually, motivations and aspirations for nontraditional students to continue onto graduate school do not exist in today's literature, specifically in the literature pertaining to student integration and impact models. Even Tinto (1993) made reference that there is a need to further study graduate education. In my own research, I aimed to understand more about what makes a nontraditional student want to continue their education after graduating with a bachelor degree and if they do not, why. Plus, I wanted to explore how academic and social integration, institutional resources and outside factors influenced the undergraduate experience for nontraditional students. I study academic integration (faculty, staff and student relationships), social integration (participation with organizations and activities, belonging to campus communities), normative contexts (family, friends and coworkers) and institutional resources (counseling, career services, programs and activities) as a way to access student integration for nontraditional students and how integration and interactions affect their aspirations upon graduation. As I mentioned in Chapter one, I am not trying to modify Tinto's (1993) student integration theory or John Weidman's student socialization model (1984, 1989) but hope to add my findings to the already existing body of research on student integration and socialization.

Below is a figure that helps explain the evolution of my theoretical framework. It demonstrates how Tinto's (1993) social and academic integration concepts overlie Weidman's

(1984, 1989) broader socialization model which incorporates several aspects of a student's socialization process before, during and after their undergraduate experience.



**Figure 2.** *Evolution of theoretical framework*

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This Chapter describes in detail the methodology and precise steps I took to conduct a successful case study. The case study method best fits my research since I examined students who are credit-based seniors in the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success at the University of Pittsburgh. In addition, I chose phenomenological interviewing as my primary method of data collection, because I am examining the perspectives of nontraditional students from their point of view. Phenomenological interviewing provides direct access to students' perspectives in their own language. In this chapter, I describe in further detail the definition and terms of a case study and a phenomenological interview, how I came to the rationale that this approach worked best with my study and why a case study was the most sensible method to answer my research questions. Next, I discuss the specifics of my study – setting, sample and how I recruited students to participate. Nontraditional students are a unique population in terms of their many external commitments outside of their studies and I will describe the steps I took to ensure I had enough participants to complete a successful and thorough study. Next, I briefly summarize the pilot study I conducted to test my data collection methods. In this portion of the Chapter I identify why the literature suggests conducting a pilot study, what I learned from testing the interview methods, the changes I made to the protocol and how I moved forward with these modifications. And finally, I outline the procedures of my dissertation data collection and



analyzing process. I do so by explaining the step-by-step procedures of what I did with my data from the transcription process to interpreting my findings.

### 3.1 CASE STUDY

A case study is defined as, “An empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2013, p. 18). Furthermore, a case study is a methodological approach that aims to understand real-world behavior and its meaning when examining a singular case or subcases within the same context. Since I studied credit-based seniors only affiliated with the McCarl Center at the University of Pittsburgh, the students that the McCarl Center serves as my main unit of analysis and the McCarl Center is the setting and context for my case (Yin, 2013). Each individual student interviewed provided thoughtful insight and meaningful data to the main unit of analysis, the McCarl Center.

In addition, a case study as a methodological approach best fits and is most appropriate for my research questions. For instance, “case studies are pertinent when your research question addresses either a descriptive question – ‘What is happening or has happened?’ or an explanatory question – ‘How or why did something happen?’” (Yin, 2013, p. 5). My research questions are both *descriptive* and *explanatory* in regards to finding the meaning to a student’s undergraduate experience and how that particular experience has played a role in a student’s decision to go on to graduate study. Also, Yin mentions that a case study emphasizes looking at a certain phenomenon with its natural settings. Unlike other methodological approaches, such as a survey

or questionnaire, I was able to probe students for the descriptive or explanatory answers I hoped to achieve during my in-person interviews. I had the ability to delve deeper into a question and/or answer if I thought it would enrich my study.

Yin (2012) states that “good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence” (p. 10). The six most common sources for evidence in a case study design are listed below in Figure 3.



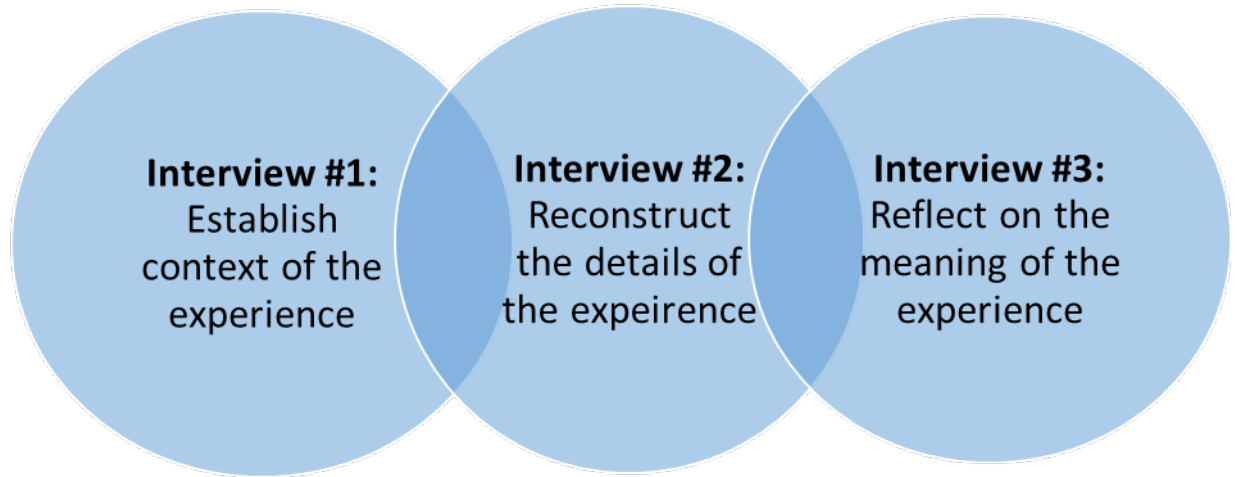
**Figure 3.** Yin’s *Sources of Evidence*

Out of the six sources for evidence, I used three. I collected data by conducting in-person phenomenological interviews, collected documents provided to me by the McCarl Center such as reports, letters to students and organizational charts and finally, gathered physical artifacts such as information packets and promotional material related to the Center. While collecting documents and artifacts is important to my study, the main source of data was from my individual, in-person phenomenological interviews. This process is described in more detail below.

### 3.2 THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW

Since I look at one phenomenon at one particular institution, the University of Pittsburgh and the McCarl Center, utilizing the interviewing technique from a phenomenological perspective best fits the purpose of my study. Interviewing is one of the main data collection processes closely associated with qualitative research. I chose to pursue a qualitative study for two reasons. First, I studied nontraditional students' perceptions and their experiences as undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh. Because of the nature of my research, I am looked to study, "things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Mertens, 2010, p. 225). Second, through my individual interviews I was able to get a more in-depth look at the *how* and *why* of the nontraditional student phenomenon and understanding these student behaviors. Starting from learning their family background, to why nontraditional students chose to enroll at the University of Pittsburgh, to understanding their everyday life on campus – all of these interview questions are very important to understanding the phenomenon of nontraditional students and graduate study.

Since this study is a phenomenological case study and aimed to understand the student experience, it is important that I conducted several individual interviews to help warrant claims and to reduce the use of unwarranted truth claims. First created by Schuman (1982) and then further developed by Seidman (2013), there is a three-step approach to phenomenological interviewing. The three-step process is detailed below in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Seidman's *Three-Step Interview Process*

Seidman (2013) explains that the three-step interview process is important because it provides a “delicate balance between providing enough openness for the participants to tell their stories and enough focus to allow the interview structure to work” (p. 20). However, Seidman does acknowledge that there are alternatives to the structure and process. While coordinating three separate interviews with each of my participants would be ideal, nontraditional students have busy schedules and external demands on their time that make this process not conducive for my study. Seidman mentions that he and his research teams in the past have conducted all three interviews on the same day or even at once because of participants' schedules. He states that the process still yielded reasonable results. Therefore, I took the same alternative approach to Seidman's interview process, and aimed to establish context, reconstructed details of the experience and reflected on the meaning of the experience in one interview. I also conducted follow-up interviews with participants who I had additional questions for or needed clarification on their responses. Appendix F demonstrates how each of my interview questions followed

Seidman's three-step interview process of establishing context, reconstructing details and reflecting on the meaning on his or her experiences.

Next, I chose to conduct individual interviews over other data collection methods such as a survey or focus group interviews because of the challenges with getting this specific group to respond. Very little research has been done on this specific demographic in part because nontraditional students already have numerous demands in and outside of the classroom, and filling out a survey or scheduling time for a group interview is not a priority. Just as I predicted in my dissertation overview, scheduling individual interviews that only take 90 minutes of a student's day generated a positive response. Seidman (2013) explains that a 90-minute phenomenological interview is appropriate for a participant to tell his or her story in detail. Anything less than 90 minutes is too short because, "given the purpose of this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experience, put it in context of their lives and reflect on its meaning" (p. 20). Furthermore, phenomenological interviewing puts an emphasis on an individual's subjective experience within a particular case (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

#### Research Questions:

1. How do nontraditional students' individual attributes and family background influence their views on higher education?
2. How does nontraditional students' integration (involvement), both academically and socially, affect their undergraduate experience?
3. What motivations and ambitions do nontraditional students have to pursue graduate study?

4. How do nontraditional students perceive institutions as preparing them for graduate study such as access to institutional resources for counseling, available information about graduate study and/or professional development workshops and seminars?

### **3.2.1 Rationale for Phenomenological Interviewing**

The following subsections provided a rationale for utilizing phenomenological interviewing and identify why individual interviews yielded the most meaningful results for my data collection. I have chosen Seidman (2013) as a resource to help me describe the phenomenological interview process and proper protocols. In addition to my own preference of using phenomenological interviewing, below are rationales found in the literature that add to my decision to use this specific approach. I draw three of the rationales from Seidman's work and the last, additional rationale listed below is one I drew from my own research and understanding of phenomenological interviewing.

First, phenomenological interviewing focuses on a person's lived experiences and what they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). A lived experience happens when the experience actually occurs; however, the impact and understanding of that experience happens when an individual reconstructs that experience (Schutz, 1967, van Manen, 1990). Seidman (2013) draws from Schutz (1967) and van Manen (1990), to explain when an individual reflects on his or her lived experience they are able to understand the foundation of the "phenomenon" of that experience. It is important for the interviewer and the interviewee to discuss in detail the constructs of a lived experience. The role of the interviewer is to guide a participant to describe their experience as close to what actually "was" through reflection and understanding. It is

critical that both the interviewer and the interviewee try to grasp the meaning of the experience. I hope to achieve this by not only asking my initial questions, but also probing students to go deeper and in more explanation of their experiences on campus as nontraditional students.

Second, phenomenological interviewing emphasizes the importance of finding the meaning in the lived experience and that requires extreme attention to detail or “act of attention” (Schutz, 1967, van Manen, 1990). It is important for the interviewer to get the participant to move past his or her first “initial gaze” of the experience and try to find a more in-depth meaning to that experience. This process is done by allowing the participant to put his or her experience in context by using descriptive language to explore, reflect and reconstruct their own meaning of that experience. I also considered this rationale because I am interviewing credit-based seniors who have been on campus for more than four years. They have had enough time at the University of Pittsburgh to explain in detail the meanings, in full detail, of their experiences.

Third, with this type of interviewing, the interviewer is trying to understand about the participant’s point of view through the interviewer’s own “subjective understanding” of the participants’ experiences (Seidman, 2013, p. 17). This rationale makes phenomenological interviewing different from other interview techniques. Typically, during an interview the person asking the questions tries to understand the participant’s experiences through the interviewer’s own point of view; however, it is important during phenomenological interviewing that the interviewer only seeks to understand how the participant views his or her own experiences and the essence of these specific experiences. In my interview protocol, see Appendix F, I try to avoid my own personal experiences and only listen and focus on the participant’s stories.

Finally, several scholars have utilized the phenomenological research design and employed similar data collection methods to study student integration and Tinto's (1993) theory. I am building upon similar studies successfully conducted on students of different races and socioeconomic statuses by researchers such as Mullen, Goyette, and Soares (2003), Walpole (2003) and Perna (2004). By mirroring the studies of the past, my own study brings to light the needs and experiences of nontraditional students. Moreover, by using similar studies as a basis for my own research, I expand upon the knowledge of the field by utilizing a trusted methodological approach in a more flexible research design.

### **3.3 CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY**

In this section, I highlight the specific details of my study, which include the setting both figuratively (the College of General Studies) and literally (the setting of where I plan to conduct my in-person interviews). I go into more detail regarding my sample of nontraditional students. I also use this section to provide details on the procedures and outcomes of my pilot study. I performed a pilot study on four nontraditional students in the spring of 2015. From conducting these phenomenological interviews, I learned a great deal and made changes to my interview questions and my strategic approach to my interview technique. And finally, I outline how the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pittsburgh reviewed and approved my study.



### 3.3.1 Setting

My study consists of senior credit-based nontraditional students at the University of Pittsburgh enrolled in the College of General Studies and associated with the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success. The University of Pittsburgh was established in 1787 and is one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the United States and the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success was established more than 50-years ago to help nontraditional students not only succeed at the University but to also help this population grow both academically and professionally by offering assistance through counseling, programs and workshops and furthering engaging students through student focused organizations. With regard to the undergraduate population, as of the fall of 2014 the College of General Studies has 555 full-time students and 472 part-time students (University Fact Book, 2015). These numbers show the size of the College and also the diversity of full-time and part-time enrollment. In comparison to another College of General Studies at an Ivy League university, Columbia University's College of General Studies enrolled in the 2014-2015 academic year almost 1,900 undergraduate students, 75% of which were full-time students (<https://gs.columbia.edu/gs-at-a-glance>, 2015). While the University of Pittsburgh's total enrollment is comparable to Columbia University's, the split between full-time and part-time students is different.

The Center's responsibilities fall under the University's College of General Studies. These particular students are pursuing degrees in the areas of the liberal arts and humanities. As shown in Appendix B, the College of General Studies offers 12 majors, 3 minors and 13 certificate programs. While online courses are available, the majority of classes are offered at the University of Pittsburgh and mostly during late afternoon and evening hours. The College

offers academic programs that are practical and results-oriented that lets students reach their own academic goals on their own time and their own terms.

The physical setting for my study will be the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success located at the University of Pittsburgh Oakland campus. It is housed within the College of General Studies and the purpose of the Center has been to provide a space that allows nontraditional students to congregate with other nontraditional students and a place where institutional resources are all located within one building to make it easily accessible for one stop for these particular students who have limited time on campus. The McCarl Center also serves as a resource for all nontraditional students on campus. The Center offers specific programming to assist in the transition and integration of nontraditional students on campus, provides social activities for nontraditional students to help form peer-to-peer relationships and also, offers academic advising and counseling from staff members who are professionally trained to work with nontraditional students and their specific needs on-and-off campus. I utilized the main conference room located in the McCarl Center to host individual interviews since it was a convenient, central place for nontraditional students to meet while on campus. The conference room was large enough to provide a comfortable environment for students and was quiet so the interviewer and the interviewee were be able to concentrate on the interview process with little disruption. One of my gatekeepers was the Director of the Center, who granted me access to the room for all of my interviews.

### **3.3.2 Sample**

Utilizing what Mertens (2010) refers to as purposive sampling, I identified the following key population – nontraditional credit-based seniors enrolled in the College of General Studies and associated with the McCarl Center. I chose seniors enrolled in their respective fields because they were near graduation and had more time to reflect and prepare for post-graduation plans than those who are just starting their academic careers such as nontraditional freshmen. In addition, veterans are also represented in my study because they are associated with the Office of Veterans Services, which is part of the McCarl Center. Finally, the College of General Studies has students pursuing a variety of different areas in the field of humanities, but their studies are limited to only these types of disciplines. For instance, some of the students I interviewed are pursuing degrees in legal studies, others in public service and some in public health. However, if a student wishes to pursue a more specific discipline outside of the humanities such as engineering or business, the University of Pittsburgh requires them to apply directly to the School and not through the College of General Studies. Below is a chart showing the breakdown of my sample looking at gender, highly, moderately and minimally nontraditional students and also veteran participants.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of sample

Name	Name Female	Degree of Nontraditional	Race/Ethnicity	Age: ≤ 24 Years	Military/Veteran
Bob	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
Chris	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
David	X	Highly	Asian American		
Jake	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
Jeff	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
John	X	Moderately	African American		
Matt	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
Mike	X	Minimally	African American	X	
Amanda	X	Minimally	Caucasian	X	
Amy	X	Minimally	Caucasian	X	
Becky	X	Moderately	African American		
Erin	X	Moderately	Caucasian		X
Gina	X	Highly	African American		
Karen	X	Highly	Caucasian		
Kate		Moderately	Caucasian		
Melissa		Moderately	Caucasian		
Sally	X	Highly	Caucasian		

In order to ensure I was successful in my research, I looked to two gatekeepers, the Director of the McCarl Center and the Veterans Benefits Coordinator to help identify students that met at least one of the criteria for Choy’s (2002) nontraditional characteristics to secure a sample for my research. Although student-veterans are not a part of Choy’s characteristics of a nontraditional student, the student-veterans recruited qualified for at least one of these characteristics and as a result, fit into the nontraditional profile for my study.

As suggested by Seidman (2013), my goal was to have at least 20 hours of data and I exceeded that goal by collecting more than 25.5 hours in interviews. My study included a diverse group of students, both female and male, from minimally nontraditional to highly nontraditional, from different ages, backgrounds, and professional experiences and external commitments. As Seidman (2013) believes, a researcher needs enough participants that provide a sufficient representation of the population and a saturation of information. A sufficient

representation means that there are enough people in the sample that those that did not participate in my research could identify and connect with the themes and patterns discussed. A saturation of information means that the researcher can conclude the data collection process when he or she starts to hear redundant information and is not learning anything new. Although my data collection process was not in fact saturated, I did however secure 16 nontraditional students from the College of General Studies that produced a well-rounded sample and exceeded my goal of 20 hours of interview data.

Also, because of my gatekeepers I was able to make contact and gain direct access to my population and sample. Both gatekeepers helped me identify students to send my email invitation to participate in my study, posted an announcement in both the College of General Studies and Office of Veterans Services online newsletters, and personally encouraged students to participate. They also assisted my study by suggesting ways to capitalize on each nontraditional student's time. And therefore, I suggested students meet with me on campus before or after their classes so that my interview time was more conducive to their schedules.

To describe in more detail the recruitment process, my gatekeepers sent an email to all credit-based seniors in the spring of 2016 asking for their participation, focusing on the importance of my research and how their feedback will be extremely helpful not only for my research, but for the overall field of nontraditional student education. I specifically indicated in my email the length of time the interview required. Appendix C includes the language of the email that my gatekeepers used to send out to graduating, nontraditional students. In addition to the email, my gatekeeper also attached the interview information script, required by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board, to provide details on the purpose and the requirements about my study. The interview information script is listed under Appendix D.

### **3.3.3 Interview Protocol Development**

I performed a pilot study in the spring of 2015 to evaluate my interview questions and the feasibility of the study. As I explain in further detail below, I gathered feedback to ensure my individual interviews were the proper length of time, and the appropriate questions were being asked in order to collect useful data. I also chose to do a pilot study so that I could practice interviewing individuals and become familiar and comfortable with the process. According to Seidman (2013), “There are unanticipated twists and turns of the interviewing process and the complexities of the interviewing relationship deserve exploration before the researchers plunge headlong into the thick of their projects” (p. 39). In addition, performing a pilot study prior to my dissertation research gave me the confidence to know my questions are generating responses that help participants build upon, explore and reconstruct their experiences at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mertens (2010) offers several ways of testing the prototype, and I took advantage of three of her suggestions. First, “it is recommended that the developer ask other professionals knowledgeable about the attribute and its measurement in the targeted sample to review the prototype” (p. 365). I have done so by working with an expert in the field of nontraditional study. By working with this person, I was able to edit my questions prior to conducting my pilot interviews. Second, after initial revisions have been made, Mertens recommends trying out the prototype with a small sample. By doing so the researcher gets a general idea of “the quality of the information as well as any problems in administration and scoring” (p. 365). I discuss this idea further in this section and describe the type of information I received and some of the obstacles needed to overcome in my dissertation research in order to execute a successful and

valuable study. And finally, Mertens suggests a way for the participants in the pilot study to provide feedback and commentary about the process and the instrument itself. Although I did not have a formal process as she suggests to provide feedback through written comments or a focus group, I did however discuss with my participants in-person, after the interviews, ways in which I could improve the process and the interview questions. I did this while the tape recorder was off to the participant, and I made notes as to when I thought questions were confusing to the participants, when I stumbled on asking a question or in fact, when a participant provided comments.

I recruited students to participate in my study by having the Director of the McCarl Center send my recruitment script and the interview information script via email to all senior members of the College of General Studies Student Council. From the recruitment email, four female students decided to participate in my study. Although my interview information script asks interested students to get in touch with me either via email, an online survey or by phone, each of my participants decided to email or talk to the Director of the McCarl Center directly and then wanted me to personally reach out to them (the majority of the students requested I email them) to confirm an interview time. Thus, I decided to change my interview script to also include in the response mechanisms to email the Director of the McCarl Center and/or Veterans Benefit Coordinator if he or she is interested in participating. I realized that hitting “reply” to the recruitment email cut out an extra step. This change generated a more positive response rate for my overall research and students felt more comfortable with me initially emailing them to introduce myself and to set-up interview times.

My pilot study took place a few weeks prior to finals and I noted for my overall study to assure my study took place early in the spring semester to avoid midterms and finals. When

meeting with these students during the pilot study, I received feedback that this was a stressful time for them and that they had a lot to manage in order to graduate that semester. And finally, since I only received data from female nontraditional students, I sought to recruit male and female students to gain perspectives from each gender.

After reviewing each interview from my pilot study, coding the data and identifying initial thematic connections, I came up with the following emerging themes that continued to further develop as I moved through my actual dissertation study. First, student disconnection was a leading theme for the way nontraditional students felt in regards to their social integration on campus. Because of limited time on campus and difference in life situations (families, full-time job, and financial independence) between students, my research indicated that nontraditional students feel a large disconnection both from their fellow peers and the University itself. Another emerging theme was age. The older, more mature students felt more connected to the classmates similar in age and also their faculty and staff members. While younger, 18-22 years-of-age students felt more connected to their traditional peers and felt as if their older classmates in the College of General Studies were not on the same academic level as someone their age. Again, I found that there was a large disconnection between younger and older students especially during group projects and class discussions. And finally, planning was another key theme that emerged from my pilot study. Nontraditional students needed to plan well ahead of time if they needed to come onto campus for extracurricular activities, meetings with advisors or even stopping by the Financial Aid Office for assistance. Since nontraditional students have several external commitments outside of school, they need to plan ahead of time for childcare, coverage at work or transportation to campus.



All of these themes led to the ultimate research questions about nontraditional social and academic integration, access to University resources, and impact upon future plans, such as graduate school. My research demonstrates that the undergraduate experience does influence the decision to pursue advanced study; however, this initial study found that social integration did not have as much of an influence on his or her decision but academic integration and access to University resources and staff did play a significant role when deciding to pursue advanced degree. Advisors and faculty members played a large part in nontraditional students wanting to pursue graduate education. Their encouragement and support led students to explore the possibility to move further with graduate school after graduation. When moving forward with my dissertation research, I used the themes developed through my pilot study as in-process memos to help me continue to formulate the themes from my dissertation data.

My pilot study was an informative and necessary step in my research process. I learned a tremendous amount about the recruitment process, my interview questions and transcribing my interview, and I also learned a great deal about how I conduct an interview. After listening to each interview, I realized that I inserted my own stories of graduate school, working through my undergraduate and thoughts on postbaccalaureate study too much and too often. In my dissertation study, I focused on the participants and their own stories, experiences and ideas. Lastly, after each of my four pilot study interviews each participant wanted me to go into further detail about my research. As a result, I began my interviews for my dissertation study by asking the student's name, anticipated date of graduation and area of study at the University of Pittsburgh and reminding them that their names will be kept confidential during the analyzing and reporting process of my research, and read my interview information script. This helped give the participant more insight on what I was trying to achieve in regards to my research. I

also explained both my professional and academic roles at the University of Pittsburgh so that I avoided explaining my own experiences during the interview.

### **3.3.4 Institutional Review Board**

My dissertation study received Institutional Review Board approval. Since my study involved minimal risk for the participants and there was little to no harm or discomfort to those that participated, I was approved for exempt status. Although I knew the participants' names because either they contacted me or I contacted them directly to schedule interviews, I did not publish any names when reporting the responses. In addition, in order to protect the respondents' identities, I used pseudonyms in place of participants' real names for data analysis and reporting.

## **3.4 DATA ANALYSIS**

Since my phenomenological study used data collected from interviews and documents and artifacts gathered from the McCarl Center, I gathered an ample amount of data to present interpretive, valid, and formidable findings. By utilizing individual interviews, the chance of triangulation (finding a consistency of evidence across different sources of data) to explain a particular phenomenon is high (Mertens, 2010). However, data analysis did not just occur at the end of my study. Mertens recognizes that, unlike a quantitative study, a qualitative study is recursive – “findings are generated and systematically built as successive pieces of data are

gathered” (p. 424). In this sense, having a well thought out plan of analysis throughout my entire study was crucial in providing opportunities for data-rich material and trustworthy findings.

The purpose of this section is to explain in detail how I analyzed, interpreted and shared my interview material. First, I tape-recorded every individual interview. As Seidman (2013) explains, “To substitute the researcher’s paraphrasing or summaries of what the participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher’s consciousness for that of the participant” (p. 114). Although my consciousness plays a major role in interpreting the data, I recorded each interview so that I had the original idea on a digital recorder and could always go back if necessary to the recording to check for accuracy. In addition to recording, I took my own notes to help me refresh my memory when I began transcribing the data. Through my pilot study, I realized how important my own personal notes were to the analysis process because there were times I would go back to my notes to either clarify an idea or to refresh my memory about what I was thinking at an exact moment during an interview.

Next, after each interview was conducted I transcribed the interview files. It was important that I created a carefully detailed transcript that, “re-creates the verbal and nonverbal material of the interview” (p. 116). In order to do so, when transcribing the data I not only included the text of the interview but also included the punctuation of each interview. Putting periods and other appropriate punctuation is important to the validity and accuracy of conveying what was said. Also, I included any nonverbal signals the interviewee did during the interview: coughs, laughs, pauses, interruptions, etc. This helped me to understand the participant’s nonverbal communication of what he or she was feeling when describing their experiences at a nontraditional student. In my pilot study I did not include non-verbal communication in my transcripts and I realized how valuable nonverbal communication is during the analysis process.

After transcribing the data, I began to study, reduce and analyze the text. With 20-plus hours of interview material, there was a significant amount of text, and as a result, I needed to reduce the text to only include significant ideas or statements that pertained to my research questions. I did so by reviewing my transcripts and marking with brackets in different color schemes passages from my interviews that were the most important and interesting. Seidman (2013) mentions that the process of reducing text can be challenging because the interviewer can lose confidence in his or her ability to sort out what is actually important. He explains, “You wonder if you are making it all up, and you feel considerable doubt about what you are doing” (p. 117). I took two critical steps in order to avoid this trap. First, I tried not to ponder too much on what was important and what was not. As Seidman states, “Do not ponder about the passage. If it catches your attention, mark it. Trust yourself as a reader. If you are going to err, err on the side of inclusion” (p. 118). And later on in my study, I did continue to exclude material that I found no longer relevant. Second, I went back to my participants and “member-checked” to clarify or get more information about any part of the transcription that I was uncertain of or found confusing (p. 18). While conducting my pilot study, I only reduced the text from each interview once. Since there was only a limited number of data to work with, it was easy to manage inserts from each of the four interviews. However, moving forward with my overall study, I needed to go back on a few different instances to reduce the text to include inserts that were most beneficial and applicable to my research questions. There were responses given by participants that did not exactly pertain to my research questions but will be important for further research in the field of nontraditional students and post-graduation plans. These ideas are discussed further in the last chapter of this dissertation.

Subsequently, I began creating profiles or vignettes of the participants' interviews. I used the reduced text of a participant's interview and created an overview to capture "context, clarify his or her intentions, and convey a sense of process and time" (Seidman, 2013, p. 119). Creating profiles allows the interviewer to use the participant's own words to reflect the person's consciousness. In order to create profiles, I reread each of the transcripts and then continued to remove sections that are no longer important. After dismissing some of the excerpts from the interviews, I created a profile that told a narrative of the interview through only the useful parts the participant provided. The profile I created for each participant also addressed my research questions and how his or her responses related to my questions. In addition to profiles, I created what Seidman calls vignettes for the interviews that may not produce enough data to create a full profile. A vignette is "a shorter narrative that usually covers a more limited aspect of a participant's experience" (p. 119). Creating profiles and vignettes is an important step in qualitative analysis, because "It allows us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis" (p. 119). Thus, profiles and vignettes are a way to analyze the data in the participant's own words and the reflection of their consciousness. With such a large number of vignettes in my study, the need for this step was highly important and critical to the organization of my analysis.

After compiling all of my profiles and vignettes, I reviewed and analyzed the documents provided to me by the McCarl Center such as letters and emails to students in regard to Nontraditional Week and upcoming events, mission statements and organizational charts. In addition, I also reviewed and analyzed physical artifacts gathered during the data collection process which included information packets on the different academic and certificate programs

offered by the College of General Studies and promotional material related to the McCarl Center. The documents and artifacts I collected added a level of detail to my analyzation process that allowed me to get an in-depth look at the materials and information created and distributed by the Center and the College of General Studies and the resources that are available to nontraditional students.

Finally, I began making and analyzing thematic connections from the data I collected. I used the profiles and vignettes to create categories that were commonly alluded to in my interview excerpts. After rereading the profiles and vignettes, I placed passages from the interviews into certain categories. Seidman (2013) mentions, “The process of noting what is interesting, labeling it, and putting it into appropriate files is called ‘classifying’ or, in some sources, ‘coding’ data” (p. 125). Once the coding process was complete, I began to reread each of the categories and passages I highlighted as important. From this process I began to understand and see thematic connections that are continuously mentioned in the data and also can be related back to the literature. This is the part in the qualitative analysis where Seidman says, “quantity starts to interact with quality” (p. 127). After making and analyzing my thematic connections, I was ready for the final stage in my data analysis – interpreting the data.

Interpreting the data should not only be done near the end of the study because as ideas start to emerge after each interview, it is important to make notes of these ideas so the researcher does not forget when moving into the final interpretation phase of the data analysis process (Seidman, 2013). From my own experience, if there were any ideas that emerged throughout the transcribing process, I created notes of my ideas in the form of in-process memos. An in-process memo is an analytic writing strategy that allows the researcher to create notes regarding themes that are beginning to develop during the data collection process (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw explain, “In writing in-process memos, the [researcher] clearly envisions outside audiences and frames his thoughts and experiences in ways likely to interest them” (p. 103). During the interpretation process, I referred to my memos to refresh my memory on my thoughts I had early on in the data collection process in regards to developing themes.

While reducing and interpreting the data I collected, I used the following questions outlined by Seidman (2013) as a guide to help assist in this process:

- What connective threads are there among the experiences of the participants interviewed?
- How do I understand and explain these connections?
- What do I understand now what I did not understand before I began my interviews?
- What surprises have there been?
- What confirmations of previous instincts?
- How have my interviews been consistent with the literature?
- How have my interviews been inconsistent with the literature?
- How have my interviews gone beyond the literature? (p. 128).

By following my strategic methodology and carefully reviewing my data, I was able to make final interpretations of my study.

### 3.5 SUBJECTIVITY

In addition to being a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh, I currently have a full-time position at the University as the Swanson School of Engineering's Charitable Relationship Manager. My role is to raise funds for the School of Engineering by creating relationships with alumni and getting them to consider their long-term philanthropic intentions with the School. While it did have the possibility to create some bias in regard to already being familiar with the setting of my study and my sample, my familiarity with the University of Pittsburgh, my current role with the Swanson School of Engineering and knowledge in the field of higher education was in fact advantageous to my research. Since I have been employed at the University of Pittsburgh for more than five years, I have come to know the culture and the different environments in each of the Schools and Colleges on campus. Prior to taking an active research role at the College of General Studies and the McCarl Center, I was familiar with their mission and purpose prior to my study. Plus, with serving in my role of a Charitable Relationship Manager for the Swanson School of Engineering, I already had existing connections with key gatekeepers and stakeholders that would be of value to or have an interest to my study. These relationships made several of the steps during my research, getting approval from the Associate Dean in the College of General Studies, recruiting participants from the McCarl Center and securing a conference room to conduct my interviews, simple and easy.

Also, I have worked in some capacity in higher education since I graduated from my undergraduate institution in 2006. I began my career in higher education fundraising in 2006 at Villanova University. At Villanova, I served as the University's Assistant Director of the Annual Fund and also as the Assistant Director of Development for the Law School. While I



worked at Villanova, I also received my master's degree in public administration and had a focus on non-profit management. Through my educational and work experiences both at Villanova and Pittsburgh, I have grown my passion for higher education and I am eager to learn more about the field. In addition, my position as a Charitable Relationship Manager has given me the skills to talk to people, to engage in meaningful discussions and to ask probing questions to generate conversation. In addition to the theoretical rationale for choosing phenomenological interviewing, my occupation has strengthened my ability to ask open-ended questions of complete strangers and gather useful information. As already mentioned I am familiar with the University of Pittsburgh through my affiliations with the Office of Institutional Advancement and as a student in the School of Education. Since I have institutional knowledge about the University, this gave me more credibility with my interviewees.

Lastly, I have a particular empathy towards the nontraditional student population. While I was a typical "traditional" student at the undergraduate level, I worked full-time while pursuing both my master and doctorate degrees. I understand through my own experiences the value of a graduate degree and the passion for education. I also understand the difficulties pursuing your education can cause to your personal, family and work life. When interviewing students, I admired their dedication to finishing their degrees and their desire to move forward at some point to receive a graduate education for either purely the sake of enjoying learning or progressing in their respective fields. I am passionate about shedding light on this particular population and hopefully raising awareness on college campuses nationwide.

## 4.0 RESULTS

This fourth chapter explains the results of my study and identifies different, significant themes that emerged when analyzing my data. First, I explain certain themes that were identified in the data analysis. I begin with a discussion of the broad definition of nontraditional students with my participants. Then, I continue to convey the rest of the themes in a way that follows the chronological order of Weidman's (1989) model, moving left to right as displayed in Figure 2. Weidman's socialization model begins on the far left with personal and family background, then moves to the center, incorporating on- and off-campus socialization, then continues to the right to address post-graduate plans. To explain further, as I was collecting and analyzing my data the themes that emerged followed the Weidman model because during the interviews, the respondents began by explaining their personal backgrounds. As the interviews continued, they then described their experiences on campus and the influences from non-college groups outside of the University. Toward the end of the interviews, they described their plans, both academic and professional, after graduation. Thus, the results are presented in a way that the reader can easily understand the themes that were identified throughout the data collection process and how each theme lends a connection to my research questions and each of the phases of the Weidman model – going from their experiences prior to entering college, to their socialization processes

during their time as a student and then to how each of these phases has influenced their plans upon graduation.

Also, in this Chapter I present interview data, in the form of extensive quotations, to support each claim. Mertens (2010) states that providing evidence that supports the data and the claims can be accomplished by, “inclusions of extensive quotations or by making data available to others” (p. 442). Since I have chosen to make my reporting anonymous and use pseudonymous (artificial identifiers) when listing direct quotes from participants, making my data available to the public is not an option.

Finally, in addition to identifying important themes and exhibiting the data collected throughout the analysis process, I also elaborate on the information provided to me by my participants and how their statements help to explain how the socialization processes at the undergraduate level influence nontraditional students’ plans post-graduation. I was able to make these connections by the notable terms, key phrases and statements nontraditional students stated during the interview process.

#### **4.1 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

*“I don’t think I am nontraditional and I am not sure I can help with your study.”*

To begin, I explain my overall analysis of nontraditional students and reveal how my sample identified with the term “nontraditional.” First, every person I interviewed was unaware of Choy’s (2002) characteristics of what exemplifies a nontraditional student. At the beginning of

each interview, I started the dialogue with the purpose of my study and provided each participant with a list of Choy's eight characteristics and the definition of each characteristic. Repeatedly I heard comments such as, "Wow, I did not realize the definition of a nontraditional student was so broad" or "Are you sure this definition includes my situation of going to school part-time because I work full-time?" These statements suggest that the definition of a nontraditional student has evolved well past a student only being labeled as older in age, delaying enrollment or having financial dependents. Choy's definition now includes characteristics that 18-22 year-old students enrolled in college institutions today can relate to –working full-time, enrolling part-time or financially independent. For instance one of my minimally nontraditional participants, Amanda, mentioned, "I didn't realize that most students don't work and I guess in that way, I am a little bit more nontraditional." Thus, the average student does not understand that the term "nontraditional" pertains to many different student situations and is not directly related to only an older, more mature student. The McCarl Center at the University of Pittsburgh hosts every year "Nontraditional Student Week" during the week of the University of Pittsburgh's Homecoming. This special week devoted to nontraditional students offers a variety of activities, programs and alumni gatherings that are beneficial for students to attend and to become engaged with faculty, staff and alumni of the College. During my data collection process I was informed that many students who have a more atypical experience but are considered minimally nontraditional do not attend these events because they think they do not belong or that the event is geared more towards older adults. However, this belief is incorrect because if an event is hosted by the Center all nontraditional students who are associated with the McCarl Center and the College of General Studies are invited and encouraged to attend. I was told by one of the participants that attendance at events hosted by the McCarl Center would significantly increase if the Center were

more descriptive about the purpose of the events and how they could be of value to all nontraditional students, just not those that are older in age.

In addition, students who are minimally or moderately nontraditional do not know they are considered nontraditional by Choy's (2002) standards. Often, when these students met with me for their interview they began the discussion with, "I don't think I am nontraditional and I am not sure I can help with your study." However after reviewing Choy's definitions, they were surprised to learn that through the exiting literature they are nontraditional in some way because of their situations on campus. In addition, since these students were minimally or moderately nontraditional, they did not realize that there were different degrees of nontraditional. It was explained to me during an interview that only those who were highly nontraditional were in fact considered nontraditional by the University. The majority of these students were of typical college age (18-22 years of age) and planned on graduating on time or within a four-year period. Therefore, even though they worked 35-40 hours per week or attended classes on a part-time bases or were financially independent from their parents or parental guardians they assumed since they were not "older", had friends that were of the same age, went through the typical freshman experience or even live on campus that they did not considered themselves nontraditional. In summary, all ranges of students with nontraditional status are unaware of the full, broad definition of this specific student profile. In addition, the term "nontraditional" does not resonate well with these particular students and since their experiences on campus are somewhat typical of a traditional college student, they distance themselves from McCarl Center events and programs when they are labeled as nontraditional.

Participants in my study also suggested that the term "nontraditional" has a negative connotation on campus. These students recurrently mentioned that their more traditional peers

perceived classes offered in the College of General Studies as effortless, for older students only or for athletes that want to take an easy route to graduation. One nontraditional student explains that her traditional peers think, “Oh I guess you couldn’t graduate in four years or maybe you just didn’t come to college the right way.” She also describes that since her traditional peers have a more typical experience while attending college they cannot relate to her experiences as a nontraditional student. She felt that it is difficult for students that are traditional to realize that not all students are the same and not all students graduated high school, went to college, enrolled fulltime and do not work while going to school. Furthermore, she stated that although a lot of her friends are traditional students on campus, this disconnection often makes her feel frustrated and isolated within her friend group.

In addition, because the term nontraditional has such a negative association on campus this is another reason nontraditional students do not participate frequently in the activities offered by the College. This relates to the Nontraditional Student Week the McCarl Center hosts each fall. A student stated, “They [the McCarl Center] offer a lot of events even a week of events during Homecoming, but I feel as if I don’t belong, like I’m too young or something. But maybe after talking with you, some of these events would be helpful to me.” Therefore, an overall suggestion brought to me by participants was that the McCarl Center should try to change the image of the Center, the College of General Studies and the term “nontraditional” to a more positive phrase on campus.

On the other hand, highly nontraditional students I interviewed seemed to be proud of their nontraditional status on campus. One student mentioned, “I don’t mind being called nontraditional because you’re right I’m not ordinary. It took a lot for me to get here and I am proud of the fact that I went back to school after so many decades after high school. Hey, maybe

I can be an example to other nontraditional students.” When I asked a follow-up question about possibly renaming the Center’s Nontraditional Student Week, highly nontraditional students disagreed and responded by saying they felt special that their College and the McCarl Center did something special for them during Homecoming Week. For instance, a student stated, “Homecoming always seems to be related to college students partying and alumni coming back to visit campus, but it is nice to know that my own College wants to make the week fun for me as well.” Thus, it was interesting to learn that not only do minimally and moderately nontraditional students have reservations about the term nontraditional, but on the other side of the spectrum, highly nontraditional students are pleased to be among this group of students on campus.

#### **4.2 REASONS FOR PURSUING AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE**

*“I knew a college degree was going to help me get that job I always wanted in business. I wasn’t going to be the one at the call center answering calls, I was going to aspire to be the one that led the company.”*

Prior to coming to college, there are several reasons why my participants considered going back to college after delaying enrollment after their high school graduation. The most common reason was that these students wanted more out of their jobs they acquired right after high school. After some time, participants who delayed college enrollment realized they wanted more – more out of life, their profession and earning (salary and hourly wages). Some students reported to me that they were waitresses at local restaurants, another worked for the United States Postal System and one student worked at a call center. To further explain, a participant realized that they wanted

more – more out of life, their profession and more money from their paychecks. A participant stated, “So I started to realize that despite what, in my youthful hubris, I had thought I could do whatever I wanted without a degree, and I could be happy but really, the jobs that I’m interested in and the things that I like require a degree.” This student did not aspire to a satisfactory job, but also he wanted to provide for his family, travel and buy a home. It was not until he saw the financial limits of his paycheck from his entry-level positions that he realized he needed, and also wanted, to pursue a college degree.

In contrast, minimally nontraditional students who went to college directly after high school did not have this type of determination for returning to school. They entered college right after high school and did not work full-time, entry-level positions. The minimally nontraditional students did have entry-level positions during the summers prior to entering college, but these positions had little to no effect on their desire to get a college degree.

In addition, another theme that evolved from the data was that nontraditional students wanted to be competitive in the job market and believed that a college degree would fulfill the educational requirement needed to qualify for higher-level jobs. For example, a participant explained to me that he did not want to be idle for the rest of his life and he did not want to have to wait for a break to climb the employment ladder. He mentioned, “I knew a college degree was going to help me get that job I always wanted in business. I wasn’t going to be the one at the call center answering calls, I was going to aspire to be the one that led the company.” This particular student was in his late twenties, not only worked entry-level positions after high school but also joined the military and was active for eight-years before enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh because of his career aspirations. He mentioned that his drive, his determination to want more out of life and his career fueled his ambition to pursue a college degree. Therefore,



nontraditional students also had a desire and aspiration to get a college degree so they could be competitive in the job market. This theme, being competitive in the job market, will also come later in this Chapter when discussing aspirations for continuing onto a graduate-level program.

In addition, job mobility was also a key theme when discussing reasons for enrolling in an undergraduate program. One student, Sally, has been in her current job for more than 20-years and on several occasions was not considered for promotions and different job opportunities by senior executives in her office because she does not have a college degree. Sally realized that even though she was excelling at her job and surpassing her goals each year, she was never going to be considered for managerial positions because she never received a college diploma. It was not the fact that she was hired for an entry-level position, but the fact that she was excelling at this particular job and could not move up in the company unless she had a college degree. Therefore, Sally realized not having a degree created limits and barriers on her ultimate career goal of holding a leadership position within her organization. Sally also inform me that her employer has since offered her tuition assistance so that she is able to overcome this hurdle and continue an upward trajectory in her career. She mentioned that although in the past she has been frustrated with being overlooked for promotions, the tuition assistance program made her feel valuable in her organization and added an extra incentive to pursue a college degree. As another example, one participant explained to me that he wanted different career opportunities in the field of business and even though he may have to work an entry-level position after graduating, he knew that a degree would allow him many different options and opportunities in his field. This particular student worked an entry-level position before enrolling in college, but informed me that the likelihood of him staying in that position for the duration of his career was probable without a college degree, but he now understands that in order to go beyond entry-level

positions you need a college degree to meet the minimum expectations most companies require for advanced positions. Therefore, this student could see first-hand from his previous work experiences, he would have to work entry-level positions when first joining a company but knew in order to grow past these positions both professionally and personally, he would need a college diploma.

Finally, more than half of those who participated in my study mentioned economic mobility as a motivating factor for getting a college education after delaying enrollment. For instance, one student explained his situation to me prior to coming to the University of Pittsburgh, “I was miserable, working paycheck to paycheck, and basically hitting a barrier” and then went on to say that his previous employers would tell him, “Well you don’t have a degree so technically you don’t qualify for this position, but we do have a parallel position but it’s not more money.” Another student simply told me, “I want to get paid a lot of money when I graduate and I can’t do that unless I at least have a college degree.” She further explained that although higher positions within an organization would be rewarding professionally, having a comfortable salary would be as equally rewarding. Through the interview process, I learned that students are mindful of today’s economy and project that in order to live a lifestyle they want to live (cars, home, supporting a spouse and children), they need to pursue specialized occupations that require a college degree. In conclusion, my data repeatedly demonstrates that nontraditional students believe that higher paying positions in companies and organizations require at a minimum a college degree. The idea of higher wages resonates with this particular demographic. They have had real-life experiences in the workplace, prior to enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh, where not having a college degree presented real barriers to their future successes.

As previously described, a majority of students who participated in my study mentioned yearly earnings as an aspiration to pursue a college degree, but this theme was accompanied by the love of learning among the most nontraditional students. My data demonstrates that almost all highly nontraditional students missed learning and being inside a classroom. As Sally framed it, “I am a curious person and the college courses I have enrolled in have sparked my curiosity and my love for learning new ideas and subject areas.” Another highly nontraditional student, Karen, excitedly mentioned, “You know I could spend the rest of my life in a classroom and be perfectly happy with that.” Highly nontraditional students added they missed being intellectually challenged. These students informed me that enrolling in college-level courses made them better-rounded both personally, feeling more confident at home and with family, and professionally. Highly nontraditional students enjoyed having the ability to participate in intellectual conversations in the workplace about subject areas they touched upon or learned in the classroom. As a result highly nontraditional students enjoyed the aspect of learning and being challenged intellectually.

As a result of discovering that highly nontraditional students thrived on being in the classroom and had high levels of intellectual curiosity, I found another theme that grades are not as important to highly nontraditional students as they are to other minimally and moderately nontraditional and traditional peers. Highly nontraditional students want to excel in the classroom and receive good grades, but it is more important to them personally that they fully grasp the concepts discussed in class so that they can carry these ideas with them in the real world. As one student stated, “I went to college to advance in my current job. My boss isn’t going to ask for my final grade at the end of the semester, but he is going to expect me to apply my knowledge to my day-to-day responsibilities.” Another student said, “I am here so that I can

get better professionally, when I do the assignments or read the textbooks I am looking for ideas of how to improve at my job.” Therefore, highly nontraditional students want to learn and apply ideas taught in the classroom to their professional lives to help them improve and become better employees.

One highly nontraditional student explained, “Because highly nontraditional students absolutely want to get a good grade in a class, but really, I want to try and learn and understand everything the professor is teaching.” This was an interesting concept to my research because in addition to the love of learning, highly nontraditional students were less concerned about receiving good grades and more concerned about obtaining all the knowledge they could from their courses, professors and textbooks. Plus, highly nontraditional students mentioned that they did not want to just memorize ideas from a textbook, something they think their traditional peers do, but rather have a hands-on learning experience where they interact with classmates and professors during class and can apply these interactions and discussions to their everyday lives and work experiences. For example, a student stated, “I am not there just to read a textbook but to truly understand the concepts taught in my class so that I can become a better employee in my division.” Therefore, highly nontraditional students believe if they acquire all the knowledge they can while enrolled in a course, this will translate to their professional lives and result in better work ethics and quality of work.

In addition to highly nontraditional students reporting their value on education other nontraditional students of all beliefs (minimally, moderately and highly) reported that they value higher education more than their traditional peers. Jake, who is moderately nontraditional, stated that he thinks his traditional peers, “half-ass” school because they do not want to put in the work and it is easier just to get by with average grades. Matt, another moderately nontraditional

student said, “I don’t think I valued an education until I was older.” And finally, Becky said: “Like I worked for this, I put myself here. I’m paying for this. This didn’t just happen just because it happened. I put myself here, so I’m trying to get more out of it as a result.” Jake, Matt and Becky are paying for their own tuition, Jack and Matt have assistance from the GI Bill, and feel that this influences their value on education and the amount of effort they put into their school work. For instance, Becky also stated that she gets very angry at students who have their parents pay for their tuition and they just, “blow it” and, “don’t realize the opportunity they have.” As a result, my data demonstrates that the different degrees on the value on higher education between nontraditional and traditional peers causes friction in the classroom.

Finally, another theme that emerged from my data was that female, highly nontraditional students had a strong desire for personal growth. This was demonstrated by nontraditional students using the words, “personal satisfaction,” “personal achievement” and “pride” when explaining why they decided to go back to college after delaying enrollment. Three of the highly nontraditional students interviewed mentioned that they did not think they were smart enough to go to college and the idea of going to college was not supported by their families. As a result, this caused these three students to go above and beyond what was expected of them from professors because of the negativity they faced from their families for pursuing a goal of getting a bachelor’s degree. On the other hand, the other minimally and moderately nontraditional female students interviewed did not mention personal growth as a reason for pursuing a college education. One of the reasons I discovered for this differentiation is that all three highly nontraditional females delayed enrollment for well over ten years and each mentioned that when they graduated from high school women were not as likely to be encouraged to go into the workforce or get a college degree. Gina, a particular highly nontraditional female student who

went back to college after almost 25-years after high school graduation, described that it was not until a member of her church encouraged her to go back and told her she was an intelligent woman. She explained, “That’s the first time I really heard someone say to me you’re smart enough to go to college and I had my children when I was younger because I thought that was what I was supposed to do but I wasn’t satisfied with that.” Sally, a highly nontraditional student, told me that she had a twin sister who was placed in more advanced classes in high school and as a result, her self-esteem was always low when considering her academic potential. It was not until she went into the work force after high school as a secretary that she, “started getting my self-esteem back, because I worked for a few years and thought I actually am not that bad. I pick up things easily and I can understand things.” Thus, it was consistently reported to me from female, highly nontraditional students that although they did not receive encouragement or positive reinforcement from their family and friends to enroll in college after graduation, the need for personal growth influenced their decision to enroll in bachelor’s program.

Lastly, pride and achieving a personal goal was mentioned repeatedly by moderately and highly nontraditional students. Going back to get a college degree with so many external commitments is a difficult challenge. However, moderately and highly nontraditional students interviewed had a passion to complete their academic programs for the simple notion of completing a personal goal. For instance, Sally told me that she has been embarrassed by not having a college degree for most of her professional career and, “I’m fulfilling a lifelong commitment to a dream of mine. I would say commitment more than a dream. I’ve always committed to get it, it’s just taken me a long time to get there. So that fact that I can cross that off my list of things that I have accomplished will feel really, really good.” When each of these students reported to me that personal satisfaction and pride were one of the reasons they were

going back to school, each student always added a comment that they were proud of themselves because they scarified commitments with family, work and friends to achieve a personal, but very burdensome goal.

### 4.3 FAMILY BACKGROUND

*“Well the thing is, my mom never had a degree and I saw how she struggled, I so I needed to do something different.”*

During the interview process, I inquired about family history and educational backgrounds. First, I found that almost all of the nontraditional students who participated in my study, except for three participants, were first-generation college attendees. One of the main reasons for delaying college enrollment is because they lacked support and encouragement from their parents and family and they did not think they were smart enough to get into college. Gina, a highly nontraditional student, said, “My mother expected me to get married right after high school, raise a family and take care of the house. She was surprised I even wanted to finish high school.” The highly nontraditional, single mothers who delayed enrollment I interviewed informed me during their interviews that their immediate family and even their ex-spouses at the time expected them to stay at home like their own mothers who never went or graduated from college and never pursued a career. A student stated, “At the time, it just wasn’t the norm for a mother to go or even desire to go to college.” Thus, since these female, highly nontraditional students had parents who never went to college caused a lack of motivation and confidence to

pursue a degree and believed they had the obligation to follow in their mothers' footsteps to take on a traditional role in the home.

Furthermore, the majority of these students came from low economic backgrounds and consequently never considered college after high school because their families were not able to outright support them financially or even help pay for tuition. During the interview process, a student told me a story of how he was raised in different trailer homes and Section 8 housing projects. He explained, "My mom never had a degree and I saw how she struggled, so I needed to do something different. I think having that degree is something different." I also learned that since these students came from low economic backgrounds, their high schools never presented options of applying for scholarships, enrolling at a community college or even applying for federal aid. One student expounded, "My high school guidance counselor mostly focused on keeping us in school and graduating. Since the majority of the school was lower-class, not too many of my friends had a desire to go to college." Students repeatedly mentioned that they wished someone would have explained to them early in their high school careers that college was a possibility no matter their financial situation. They also described during their interviews that they were highly disappointed in their high school guidance counselors and hope that counselors today are more communicative with students about college and regardless of the high school's culture, demonstrate early on the value of a college degree.

Subsequently, since these students came from family backgrounds where either their mother did not work or both the mother and the father had working class jobs, they were told that college was not an obtainable goal because of the financial burden it would place on their families and the return on investment was not worth the cost of tuition. A single-mother informed me that she "came from a family background that convinced me that I couldn't do it,



both academically and financially.” It also was continuously explained to me that since no one in his or her family went to college, the process and knowledge of how to apply for financial aid, what scholarships were available and how to research and compare costs of tuition between different institutions were never shown or demonstrated to them. As a result, during the interview process it was conveyed to me that the logistics of how a student applies and pays for college was never explained and as a result, the process seemed too daunting and complicated for these students to undertake on their own.

On the contrary, I found that students I interviewed who had parents that graduated from college, and in some cases, completed advanced degrees, received high levels of encouragement from their parents and families to enroll at a University directly after high school graduation. I also discovered that students who received support from family members about going to college were mostly all of minimally nontraditional status. Amy explained to me that she works full-time and is financially supporting herself while going to school, but her parents, who are college graduates, always advocated for higher education. She went on to explain that she needed to work 40-hours or more per week to pay for college but her parents also exemplified how a degree would be rewarding in the long run in regard to career opportunities and economic mobility. Despite the fact that working full-time and solely supporting herself has made her college experience nontraditional and challenging at times, she explained that she has no regrets and all of her sacrifices and long hours at her job are well worth the opportunity to be a student at the University of Pittsburgh . Another student’s parents did not attend college but his grandfather not only graduated from college but went on to graduate from medical school and become a doctor. He could see the difference between his parents and his grandfather in terms of lifestyle, professional opportunities and income levels. And in addition, was very proud of his

grandfather and even after his death, continues to serve as an inspiration to achieving his own educational goals. He too wants to continue onto medical school, just like his grandfather.

Next, nontraditional, first-generation college students felt a tremendous responsibility to encourage their children, grandchildren and other family members to get a college degree. Chris, who is a nontraditional student and also a veteran, explains,

It's nice setting the standard for them [my family] because I want them to push themselves past what I've been able to do and I think if the majority of them are able to do it, my family will do a 180. And if at the end of my life I could look back and say that, you know I sparked that, well that would be just great.

During the interview process, I could see firsthand how these students not only felt an obligation to exemplify the importance of getting a college degree but also how proud they were that they set a new standard for their families. Furthermore, many of the parents I spoke with mentioned during their interviews that they are encouraging their own children to go to college and hope that their experience has provided a positive example that higher education is worth the investment. Karen, a single mother, informed me that if she is not able to find child care for her seventh grade son, she brings him with her to class in the evenings. Karen was appreciative that not only did the College of General Studies understand and allow her to bring her child to class, but the faculty and staff took the time to speak to her son about his own educational aspirations. As a result of this individual attention from the professors and staff, Karen's son is more energetic about his studies and has high hopes of someday following in his mom's footsteps and graduating from the University of Pittsburgh.

Also, I found that the students I interviewed who did have parents that went to college and graduated had high levels of encouragement from their families to enroll at a university directly after high school graduation. I also found that students who had family support to get an

undergraduate degree were mostly minimally nontraditional. Amy, a minimally nontraditional student explained to me that even though she is working full-time and financially supporting herself, her parents who are college graduates always pushed higher education and told her to take as long as she needed to get that degree. Despite the fact that this has made college life difficult for her in regards to time and money management, she learned from her parents that working hard will pay off in the future. Amy saw first-hand the benefits of a degree and knew that in the end, getting a degree in the long-run would help her economically, professionally and personally. To conclude, work-family-life balance was said to be challenging by many of the participants regardless if they were minimally, moderately or highly nontraditional in status. Nontraditional students have a high level of stress because they feel as if either family commitments such as family bonding, attending soccer games, helping to raise their children were not put as a priority. Or, work commitments such as working to their utmost potential, spending equal amount of time on work projects and school projects or lacking in focus on work responsibilities caused their work-life to suffer. Or finally, they relinquished personal hobbies or activities that made them well-rounded individuals such as dropping out of their running club, terminating their gym membership or giving up painting in their free time. All of these sacrifices have caused stress and an imbalance to their personal lives. One student mentioned, "I always feel like I don't belong. I sometimes don't relate to my traditional friends on campus because they don't understand I have to work full-time and go to school at night and I don't feel like I belong at my job because my colleagues don't understand all of the obligations I need to fulfill for school." Thus, the nontraditional students that participated in my study have various reasons to have pursued a college degree, but they have said it has sometimes come at the cost of professional and personal sacrifices.

#### 4.4 SOCIALIZATION ON CAMPUS

*“In terms of my younger peers, there’s just no way could we ever be on the same mentality level.”*

According to Weidman’s (1984, 1989) model, the next phase of the socialization process includes interaction, integration, and learning on college campuses. In my analysis, I learned how each of these three prongs played a significant role, both positively and negatively, on a nontraditional student’s academic and social undergraduate experience. First, through my data I found that there is a lack of social integration on campus between nontraditional students. From my study, I uncovered that age was the leading factor of why nontraditional students are not well connected with other nontraditional students. I found that students who are minimally nontraditional and of a younger age want to spend more time with their more “traditional” peers than other, older nontraditional students in their programs. These younger nontraditional students had a typical freshmen year experience, they lived on campus freshmen year and became friends with students their own age. Since these particular nontraditional students have limited time on campus because of working full-time and going to class part-time, they reported that they have to put in extra effort to maintain their relationships with their “traditional” peers who spend the majority of their time on campus. Another reason as to why younger nontraditional students do not interact or connect well with other older nontraditional students is that they do not see themselves as nontraditional and subsequently, try to have a typical college experience by surrounding themselves with students the same age, attending social events appropriate for their age group or living on or off campus with other traditional students. One

student said, “I would rather hang out with friends my own age either at their apartments or at a bar then attend a University sponsored event that maybe some of the older nontraditional students would elect to attend.” Similarly, the highly nontraditional students who are older in age, work full-time and have family responsibilities state that once their obligations on campus are finished they immediately leave campus to tend to their external demands. Very sternly, one student declared, “My child is my priority, that’s it.” Gina and Karen, two highly nontraditional female students, explained further that it was easier to communicate and socialize with older students because this demographic understood that they only had time to create these friendships during class time and socializing outside of class was not an option because of external commitments. Because of this mutual understanding between older nontraditional students, it was reported that there was less pressure to socially engage with other students outside of class and they did not feel guilty about the amount of time they allotted to bonding with peers.

Similarly, in addition to age being a factor for the disconnection between nontraditional students on a social level, common ground also played a part as to why students who are nontraditional but differ in life, military and work experiences do not socially integrate well on campus. One student phrased it, “They are just two or so years out of high school, they have no idea what’s going on” and another student stated, “In terms of my younger peers, there’s just no way could we ever be on the same mentality level.” I also found that even though their younger nontraditional counterparts attended the same classes and also belonged to the McCarl Center, older students with outside work and military experience felt that they were more mature and often referred to younger students as “kids”. Bob, a student veteran explained to me that he is, “a man stuck in a young person’s world.” He also went on to tell a story of how his professor wanted their class to research and write about a historical figure. A younger student in his class

wrote about Tupac, a rapper who died in the 1990s. He very annoyingly stated, “I was like come on, that’s who you came up with. Not only are they not important in history but this person died when I was in high school.” Since Bob has served overseas, he believed that there were more appropriate historical figures to research in terms of political figures because he has had exposure to what he called “real heroes” in the military. Thus, common ground and life experiences can cause a negative effect on nontraditional social and academic interactions with their younger, less experienced nontraditional peers.

However, on the other hand, my study revealed that older students are also self-conscious with their interactions with their younger peers. My data demonstrates that older students are often mistaken for the professor because of their age or younger students shy away from talking to them during class because there is a large disconnect in age and experiences in and out of the classroom. For instance, Karen stated, “In the classroom, I guess that they [younger students] feel that it’s too weird to approach me. Like I have all these important things outside of school to deal with.” As a result, I found that older students, with families tend to bond and integrate with other students who are in the same situation. In addition, Gina said that she bonds with older students because they feel threatened with students who are younger and are coming right out of high school. She felt that these students are more technologically advanced and feels self-conscious when she has to ask a professor about how to look up an article online or use a certain computer software. I found that in order to give older nontraditional students the courage to ask these questions in class, it is an “I got your back if you have mine” mentality with other older students. Both Gina and Karen reported that although it is unfortunate that older and younger students find it harder to relate to each other, bonding with their older counterparts provides a comfortable and encouraging environment.

Next, not only are nontraditional students who had real work and military experiences prior to coming to campus self-conscious with their younger peers but also feel that they are perceived as annoying during class discussions. This perception caused nontraditional students to interact less with their younger peers and prevented them from developing relationships in and out of the classroom with traditional classmates. For example, one student explains, “I’m that guy in class that everyone dislikes because I am always raising my hand, I am always bringing up experiences I had in the military and I am always interrupting students who speak-up during discussions that I feel have zero real-world experience.” Nontraditional students also feel embarrassed in the classroom because they sense that their professors call on them more often to participate. The most common reason I found as to why nontraditional students feel this way is because they feel as if professors rely on them to tell their own life stories or how things are done in today’s work environment. For instance, a participant stated, “I think that the expectations from those of us that are nontraditional and have been in the workforce for a while are that we are going to know a lot more than traditional students. And so we are expected to answer questions more than our traditional students.” Also, nontraditional students believe they are annoying to their more traditional peers because they are also looked upon by faculty to be leaders in group projects. Some participants reported that they despised group projects with traditional students because they felt as if either the professor appointed them the leader or they automatically became the leader because traditional students are not ambitious and do not take charge of a project. Plus, nontraditional students felt that traditional students are not mindful of nontraditional students’ schedules outside of class. For example, nontraditional students reported that their traditional counterparts wanted to meet after class or during the weekends to discuss group projects but this is not an option for students who have families and need to depart

from campus immediately after class was dismissed or cannot make it back to campus on a Saturday or Sunday because of other obligations. Also, Gina mentioned during her interview that younger-age students were lazy and waited till the last minute to participate in group projects. She went on to explain that because of all of her external commitments with work and family, she did not have time to complete an assignment the night before the due date. She also went on to say that younger-age students never listened to her advice or suggestions during group projects. While this made her feel frustrated, she told me that it also made her feel unintelligent relating to the fact that sometimes older, more mature students feel self-conscious.

There were a few nontraditional students that I spoke with that did not mind being a leader in group settings because they felt that they had outside resources to make completing the project easier, such as hosting meetings in their office since they work on campus or offering conference call lines so that all students could participate from their respective dorms and living spaces. I also found that some nontraditional students do not mind the responsibility because they want a good grade on a project and because of already having some type of leadership experience in the workforce or in the military, feel that the traditional students in their group will not meet deadlines or will not guide the group in the right direction to meet the objective of the project. Alternatively, some of the nontraditional students interviewed reported that they did not want to be leaders in the classroom or in group projects. They felt as if they get this experience from being in a work setting and that professors should allow the opportunity for traditional students to play a role that they may never have been exposed to prior to coming to college. Very candidly a participant mentioned during her interview that she gets pressure all day from her company and when coming to class she wants to take “a back seat” in group discussion and



projects. Therefore, nontraditional students simply did not want to be the leader in group projects and felt they were forced to do so because of work and military experiences.

Interestingly, on the other hand, I discovered that the perception highly and moderately nontraditional students have is not an accurate account of what really traditional and minimally nontraditional students feel towards their highly nontraditional counterparts. Traditional and minimally nontraditional students appreciated older, more nontraditional students' input and insight during class discussions and if there was not the intimidation factor, wished they would have interacted with these nontraditional students more. Many minimally nontraditional students interviewed even described class discussions which included older students and students with outside work experience more enlightening and that topics could be discussed in more depth because of the different perspective these students bring to the classroom. To reiterate, a minimally nontraditional student stated, "It is really nice to have that different perspective because you can easily become kind of trapped in this like college world full of irresponsibility and so it's really nice to have more adults around because they have life experiences that they can kind of comment on and it's very valuable." Furthermore, another minimally nontraditional student explained, "You get a firsthand real-world experience from your nontraditional classmates that have been through what you are discussing in class." Plus, another student stated, "Even my friends that are considered traditional have mentioned to me that they appreciate hearing stories of real experiences by the older people in our classes." Therefore, it was interesting to collect such conflicting data between minimally and highly nontraditional students involving class discussions and interactions.

In addition, my data demonstrated that another type of socialization between nontraditional students and other students on campus comes in the form of mentorship. Several

of the students I interviewed reported that they serve as a mentor in some form to other students either associated with the McCarl Center, Office of Veteran Services or to other traditional students in their classes. As aforementioned, highly nontraditional students typically like to associate themselves with other highly or moderately nontraditional students who are going through the same life situations in regard to work and family obligations. However, Sally, a highly nontraditional student, says she enjoys socializing with younger students because she feels that she is a mentor to them in and outside of the classroom. She has college-age children and she likes mentoring students who are her children's ages and feels she has gained a better perspective of what her children are going through at their own respective colleges because of her interactions with her younger, traditional classmates. Sally informed me, "It is one of the reasons I think I like being back in school, is I love feeling like I can help other people. I just feel like I need to take care of these guys [traditional students], these people." She treats these students to either lunch or dinner because she would want someone to do that for her children. Many of these students call her directly to either ask advice on their future careers, homework assignments or even about life situations that they are facing on campus. This experience brought this particular student such satisfaction.

Other nontraditional students interviewed reported that they are a mentor by either volunteering to speak to incoming students during the University's orientation, being a tour guide for the College of General Studies, participating in a mentorship program for first-year nontraditional students or for other veterans that are associated with the Office of Veteran Services. These students thought that mentoring helps them feel more connected to the University and their peers. A participant mentioned, "When they [incoming nontraditional students] think they can't do it, I am always there to encourage them and tell them that they can

by explaining my own nontraditional situation.” Matt, who is also a veteran, is a mentor through the Office of Veteran Services and likes to assist fellow veterans who are trying to transition from active duty to civilization life. He explained to me that since he has been through such a challenging transition, he believes he can detect when a student is feeling overwhelmed or could be of harm to themselves. Matt also hopes in the future to become a mentor to students, both traditional and nontraditional, who are thinking of joining the military. He would like to be an example to other students at the University of Pittsburgh since his military experience and benefits from GI Bill gave him the opportunity to enroll in college. Other, older students reported to me that they serve as a mentor to other students informally through interactions inside the classroom. For example, Gina said to me, “You know I am old enough to be their mother, but I often seek out students who are having a hard time in class and who are struggling and let them know, kind of in a motherly way, that if I can do it, they can do it.” She went on to tell me that these positive interactions have resulted in traditional students excelling in the classroom, but her excelling as well both academically and socially. Thus, my data demonstrates that nontraditional students serving as a mentor has created relationships and interactions with other nontraditional students and other traditional students that has resulted in positive social interactions while on campus.

Through my interview process, I found several key themes relating to how well nontraditional students felt integrated academically at the University of Pittsburgh. Similar to my findings regarding social integration and interaction, I discovered that there is a large disconnect in the classroom among nontraditional students. The more minimally nontraditional students felt that the curriculum and workload was more tailored to highly nontraditional students. For example, one minimally nontraditional student explained that she thought

professors catered to students who had not been in the classroom for some time and made requirements for assignments easy to achieve. The students that felt this way also described their academic experiences as easy or not challenging enough. One student expounded and said she was often bored in her classes and thought that at times that her academic experiences were a repeat of what she learned in high school. While on the other hand, moderately and highly nontraditional students felt well integrated academically and considered their academic career both stimulating and well-rounded. One moderately nontraditional student stated, "I think the classes offered by CGS [College of General Studies] are thought provoking and challenge you both in and outside the classroom through discussions and class assignments." Moderately and highly nontraditional students also felt that their outside experiences both in the workforce and military caused them to think differently about what was being taught by professors and the curriculum was challenging because it caused them to change their behaviors in professional settings. For instance, a student stated, "I always had done it a certain way in my job and after this particular class, it challenged me to think outside the box and think how I would move forward differently in an organization now that I know what I know." Thus, minimally nontraditional students versus moderately and highly nontraditional students viewed the workload and the curriculum differently in regard to the degrees of difficulty and complexity.

Finally, the interactions and relationships developed between faculty members and nontraditional students had an influence on nontraditional students' academic integration and socialization on campus. First, there is a significant difference between the level of association and rapport with faculty members between highly and moderately nontraditional students that were interviewed and minimally nontraditional students. Older students with children, a family and outside work experience felt very connected to their faculty because of relatable situations.

As one student phrased it, “I can have real conversations with them [faculty] about marriage, homeownership and the responsibilities of multi-tasking every day.” Several other older, adult students said that they connected well with their faculty because of being around the same age. One student in particular mentioned that she felt that faculty members found it easier to talk with her before or after class because they were the same age, had children around the same age and were dealing with the same multiple obligations outside of the University. Two other participants that were veterans stated they had great rapport with faculty because they thought faculty respected their service in the military and their abilities to bring different perspectives to classroom discussions. For example Matt, a student veteran stated, “One professor would always pick my brain about topics we were discussing in our history class because she knew I served in the military and she wanted her students in the class to hear a first-hand account of what was currently happening with the United States military.” Another student agreed and said that she felt faculty went above and beyond to include her in class discussions because she had the ability to connect her real-life situations in the military to topics that were being covered in the curriculum. Similarly, a student who worked in the same field as one of her professors explained that she and that faculty member would talk often outside of class about career aspirations and goals and this faculty member went out of his way to give sound advice to help her advance in her position. Plus, this particular faculty member also helped her with interview techniques, application processes and writing skills will significantly help her when going to apply for more advanced jobs after graduation. In conclusion, older nontraditional students with outside work, life and military experiences reported to have positive interactions and relationships with their faculty members.

In contrary, younger, minimally nontraditional students felt that they did not integrate or interact well with faculty or have good rapport with them outside of class. These students felt intimidated by faculty members and believed they could not approach professors as easily as older students because of their lack of real-world experiences. For instance, a student stated, “It’s intimidating before class when older students and faculty members are talking, I don’t feel like I can go up and join the conversation because I don’t have the same experiences both at home and work as they do.” Consequently, this also leads students who are younger and minimally nontraditional to feel that faculty members treat them like “kids” because they are not as aggressive and outgoing as older students in class. An older student agreed with this idea stating, “I am much more respected by my faculty because I am not intimidated by them and I will push-back when it is necessary.” Other older students brought up the idea that they are not afraid to question the faculty’s grading scales, homework assignments or objectives for class projects. Because there is limited intimidation, older students also explained to me that they feel as if this causes professors to realize that nontraditional students have a higher standard of what these types of students expect from them in regard to being fully prepared for each class and staying relevant in their respective fields. Thus, minimally, younger nontraditional students felt disconnected to their professors and also felt intimidated that older, more nontraditional students interacted with their professors with ease and confidence.

#### **4.5 A NORMATIVE CONTEXT: COLLEGE OF GENERAL STUDIES AND THE MCCARL CENTER FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS**

*“In a sea of so many people, it was nice to get a ‘hello’ from an administrative assistant or a ‘hey, how is that certain class going’ from your advisor.”*

Broadly examining the College of General Studies and more specifically, the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success was an integral part of understanding the processes of socialization for nontraditional students. As Weidman (1989) states, normative contexts such as majors, peer groups and co-curriculum programs can effect students’ interpersonal and intrapersonal socialization on college campuses. Weidman, DeAngelo and Bethea (2014) explain further, “Normative contexts are settings in which students are exposed to ideas and perspectives shaped by experiences with value-laden structures, such as academic disciplines/fields of study or more informal experiences with peers, co-curricular organizations, or faculty outside of formal settings” (p. 45). My study included normative contexts such as the College of General Studies, which is known to offer nontraditional students class times that are later in the afternoon or in the evenings and the McCarl Center, which is an academic center on campus that offers assistance, programming and advising to all nontraditional students. Therefore, it was important during the interview process to further explore how the College and the Center played a role in nontraditional students’ socialization processes.

First, there is a strong connection between the nontraditional students I interviewed and the McCarl Center. Regardless of their lack of attendance at events, each student interviewed appreciated the staff at the McCarl Center and stated they had a personal connection to either

their advisor, the Director of the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success or even a faculty member. It was also explained to me that the nontraditional students enjoyed their time at Pitt because of the administration that assisted them during their time at the University and rated their experiences as positive. For instance, one student stated, “I absolutely love Pitt and it is because of all the wonderful people I have encountered along the way and all of the assistance they had given me when I needed a helping hand.” Other students expounded and said that it was the informal meetings and discussions with staff and faculty that made them feel more integrated at the University. As an example, a student mentioned, “In a sea of so many people, it was nice to get a ‘hello’ from an administrative assistant or a ‘hey, how is that certain class going’ from your advisor.” Therefore, nontraditional students felt a part of campus and integrated at the University because of the one-on-one relationships and care these students were given by faculty and staff.

Next, nontraditional students felt a strong connection to the McCarl Center because they believe the Center gave them one-on-one attention and that staff and faculty had a personal connection to their students and understood their external commitments outside of class. Students said that compared to other Schools at the University, School of Arts and Sciences and College of Business Administration in particular, the McCarl Center made their academic and social experiences a lot less stressful and a lot more manageable. One student told a story of how she had to delay her enrollment to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University and since she was just a number in a very large freshmen class, she felt the staff and faculty in the School of Arts and Sciences did very little to help her get back on track and begin her classes that following spring semester. She explained that when she discovered that the College of General Studies existed she immediately applied to transfer to the College. The advisor that was



assigned to her at the McCarl Center went above and beyond to get her enrolled for classes and achieve her goal of still graduating within a reasonable timeframe. This goal was important to her because she was paying for her own education. This student explained, “I think it is amazing they [the McCarl Center] cater so much to so many different groups of people, they are probably the reason why I’m graduating with what I want [degree] and in a timeframe I was hoping for. I am just super grateful.” Another student revealed, “I think they are a little bit more mindful of the needs of their students as opposed to a lot of the other departments where they have so many undergraduates and they aren’t as personally involved.” And finally, another participant stated that he would not have fit in at his first choice at the University, the College of Business Administration, because it was too large in size and there would not have been any one-on-one attention between him and the staff and faculty. As a result, these students found staff at the McCarl Center were accessible and tried to help their nontraditional students overcome whatever challenges they may face at the University. Whatever diverse personal, academic or professional goals these nontraditional students had, the McCarl Center staff had a positive influence on their undergraduate experiences.

In addition to staff, advisors at the McCarl Center were also reported to have a positive influence on nontraditional student integration and socialization on campus. My data constantly shows words to describe advisors at the McCarl Center as excellent, encouraging, problem solvers, helpful, realistic and gives personal attention. Common responses by participants of how they overcame situations such as how to get financial aid, how to apply for graduation, or how to get more involved on campus was because their advisors provided different options and information on how to find solutions to their problems. As an illustration, a student said, “Advisors at the McCarl Center have a lot more mindfulness in terms that your time is worth a

lot to you and you have a lot of other things going on besides school and so they are way more willing to help you out and to make sure you achieve your goals.” Another student mentioned that he has always been impressed that his advisor knows not only his name but also his particular situation of being a veteran, older and returning to school after many years after high school graduation. He felt as if his advisor had a real connection with him and took a vested interest in his studies. Thus, advisors at the McCarl Center had a positive influence on students’ socialization on campus because of the personal connection and vested interest in nontraditional students.

Also, the College of General Studies, as a whole, provided a positive, well-rounded experience for students. The College is known for offering classes that are more appropriate, both in terms of curriculum and times when classes are offered, for nontraditional students. As a result, students conveyed that they chose to come to Pitt because of the College of General Studies was geared more towards nontraditional students. One student mentioned, “I looked everywhere to find a program that would fit my schedule and the reason I came to Pitt was because they had the College of General Studies.” Other schools at the University of Pittsburgh were thought to have had more of a “predetermined mold” and if a student was not a traditional student, it was harder to take classes that were suitable to nontraditional students’ schedules and external commitments. Finally, students also felt connected to the College of General Studies because of the size of enrollment is one of the smallest on campus and this created a friendlier atmosphere in class and a sense of community on campus. A student informed me that she found comfort in walking into a classroom and always knowing a handful of people. She explained that this helped reduce the anxiety of not knowing anyone and created a comfortable environment. Another student said, “To me it feels like socially a better experience that way in that it’s small,

than like it was at CBA [Business School] where maybe I wouldn't know people." Hence, the mission and the size of enrollment at the College of General Studies created a sense of community, which positively impacted students' experiences and socialization on campus.

Next the McCarl Center offers a variety of social activities on campus to encourage socialization, integration, interactions and relationship building, among nontraditional students; however, nontraditional students who participated in my study reported that these events are not well attended. In these next sections, I will explain how the data shows this form of socialization is not the most effective with nontraditional students and their reasons as to why these students do not attend social events. First, the time of when these activities and events are offered are not conducive to nontraditional students' schedules. Many of the events, such as a Friday evening alumni meet and greet during Homecoming, hosted by the McCarl Center are scheduled in the evenings and on weekends. Students informed me that they would rather spend time with family and friends outside of school than spend their evenings or weekends with their peers. Karen, a single-mother, justified missing events by stating, "I have too many obligations outside of class that I can't take away from doing my kid's laundry or missing bedtime to socialize with my classmates." Therefore, external commitments seemed to be a major reason why McCarl Center events are not well attended by nontraditional students with families. Also, events and activities are not well attended by nontraditional students because they either felt too old or too young to attend. Since the McCarl Center represents a wide range of students, mainly in age, students felt they might be the oldest person there and feel out of place or they would be too young for the crowd and not fit in. Furthermore, a student revealed, "When you think of the stereotype of a nontraditional student, I don't fit in, so sometimes here I do feel a little out of place because I'm not traditional but would like as much as possible to structure my life as a traditional student and

attend traditional events on campus like athletic events.” Another older student simply said she is too old and too far in her career that she does not need to attend social events offered by the McCarl Center.

Next, many students brought up the event called Nontraditional Week hosted by the McCarl Center. As already mentioned, many students think the word “nontraditional” has a negative connotation on campus and as a result, feel embarrassed to attend any of the events during the week. Although they felt these events could help them integrate more socially and could help them interact better with faculty and staff, nontraditional students said they did not like the name of the week-long event and consequently did not attend any of the planned programs and social gatherings. My findings also reported that minimally nontraditional students did not attend events planned during Nontraditional Student Week because they did not associate themselves with being nontraditional. Amanda stated, “I think the McCarl Center should explain better how Nontraditional Student Week could help a variety of students, not just those that are older.” This point also relates to the fact that the term nontraditional covers a broad range of characteristics and many students do not realize they are considered nontraditional on college campuses.

The final theme I discovered in regards to the McCarl Center is that nontraditional students did not capitalize on all amenities and resources offered by the University and the College of General Studies. First, amenities utilized were those that could not only serve a purpose to nontraditional students’ academic lives but their personal lives as well. As an example, several students reported that they used the Math Center, Writing Center and peer tutoring services offered by the University. They used these resources and made extra time in their daily schedules so that they could better understand assignments and projects assigned my

professors. Numerous students conveyed that they utilized the Internship Office on campus because they needed an internship as a requirement for their degree. Staff associated with this specific office also was rated as highly helpful and played a major role on their academic involvement on and off campus. One student stated, "I was able to secure a valuable internship during one of my summers between sophomore and junior year of college. Because of the help the Internship Office provided me and because I was able to get this position, I am now set-up to get a full-time offer after graduating." Also, other amenities that were commonly reported as being utilized were the library, computer lab and on occasion, the gym. These amenities were utilized because they made the daily lives of nontraditional students easier and more manageable. Computer labs were used because students did not have a printer at home or did not want to carry their personal laptops to work and then in the evening to class. The library and its staff was utilized because they needed help on a paper or had to take out a book that was expensive to buy with their own money. Likewise, the gym was utilized because there is free access any gym on campus and this in return saved nontraditional students' money because they did not have to buy their own personal gym memberships. I also discovered through my research that the library, computer lab and gyms were used as a way to spend time in between classes or if they got to campus earlier than expected. As a result, since nontraditional students do not have a home base on campus, amenities on campus are used as a way to pass time. Finally, the Career Services Office was also commonly used by nontraditional students. However, it was interesting to find that it was the Career Services Office located directly within the McCarl Center and not the general University Career Services Office that played a helping role with nontraditional students. Again, this relates to the theme that nontraditional students feel they are just a number at the

University but within the McCarl Center, staff at the Career Services Office actually know their career aspirations and can ultimately serve them more affectively.

Finally, another reoccurring theme found when discussing nontraditional students utilizing amenities on campus was the phrase “planning”. Since nontraditional students have several external commitments outside of the classroom, students informed me during the interview process that they needed to plan well in advance if they needed to arrive on campus early to speak with administrators before the end of the business day or if they needed to stay after class to work on a group project or speak to a professor. As an example, a student stated, “I just have to know a week and a half before if I need to be on campus so I can ask for time off at Qdoba.” In addition, these nontraditional students indicated that in order for them to spend extra time on campus to either dine at one of the eateries, go to the library before class or use one of the gyms on campus they had to plan well in advance and could not just enjoy these amenities on a whim like their traditional counterparts. Whether it is securing childcare for their children, getting out of work early or getting a shift covered, nontraditional students have multiple external demands that limit their free time on campus. Karen explains, “When you’re part-time and you’re nontraditional you’re not going to stay on campus when you have the responsibility of a house and two children...you don’t have time to, there is no entertainment.” As a result of nontraditional students having to plan in advance to come to campus early, stay late, or to enjoy one of the amenities on campus, I found that there was a lack of presence on campus which in turn caused nontraditional students to feel less integrated and less a part of the “traditional” student experience.

## 4.6 POST-GRADUATION PLANS

*“I started to realize how beneficial it is to get a secondary education, to get that life skillset.”*

Each of the findings listed thus far in regards to socialization on campus all contribute to the final part of my analysis of determining the motivations and ambitions of post-graduation plans of nontraditional students. After compiling my data almost all of the nontraditional students I interviewed have aspired to go to graduate school as a next step after graduation; however, they would delay pursuing an advanced degree for a variety of personal and professional reasons. First, the degree of nontraditional and age played a major factor on if and when nontraditional students would enroll in a graduate study program. The nontraditional students who worked full-time, were financially independent and who were in the 21 to 23 years-of-age range all wanted to go directly into the work force first before taking on more student loans and debt. For instance Amanda, a minimally nontraditional student, stated, “I don’t want to jump into grad school that’s going to cost me money and I’d rather make sure that I want to do it before I set down a bunch of money.” Several other students interviewed mentioned that they hope an employer would pay for his or her education and when looking for jobs after graduation, each of these students has also researched to see if the company they are interested in has tuition assistance programs. Furthermore, another student said that they don’t want to start their career three to four years after they graduate, they wanted to get some experience and also have their employer pay for graduate school. Finally, I also found that nontraditional students are simply burned out and need a break from academia because of all the responsibilities both on and off campus. For example, a participant mentioned, “I am considering graduate school but to be honest, I really

need a break. It has been such a struggle to get to graduation, I want to just enjoy my family and life for a while.” Thus, graduate school is an aspiration by many of my participants’ but the continued theme throughout each interview was that they wanted to delay enrollment because of costs, eagerness to begin working in his or her field or because they needed a break from school after their undergraduate experience.

I also discovered through my interviews that older, highly nontraditional students had a real zest for further education. From my data, I found that because their undergraduate experience was so challenging and rewarding they wanted to continue their education. Karen stated, “I love learning so if I could figure out a way to go for free, I would be in school for the rest of my life.” Karen also told me that she has high goals to get her PhD and attend an Ivy League school such as the University of Pennsylvania. While on the other hand, I interviewed only one, highly nontraditional student that they do not want to go onto graduate study. Sally’s reasoning is, “I wouldn’t finish until I was close to 60 and at that point I will want to retire.” She also stated that by the time she would graduate with an advanced degree she would be at the end of her career and that it would not bring her much value at that point in her life.

Next, many of the students interviewed explained that they wanted to go to graduate school because they could see the economic and professional benefits. For instance, one participant said, “I started to realize how beneficial it is to get a secondary education, to get that life skillset.” This particular student went on to say that he could also see that the more specialized in your field, the more chances you are to find a high paying job after graduation. Nontraditional students also thought they would be more competitive in the job market with an advanced degree. One student acknowledged that a graduate degree is becoming more of a requirement for certain positions in the workforce. She went on to say, “I know in order to get



ahead professionally, I know that I need to go back. I need to become more specialized in my area of law enforcement in order to make more money.” Another student agreed and said that a college degree is basically equivalent to a high school diploma in today’s job market. In addition, economic benefits were repeatedly mentioned when inquiring if a nontraditional student was considering graduate school after graduation. As one student simply put it, “You need that higher degree to get that higher paying job.” Further, a student informed me that he has ambitions to become a company executive in business and he believes he will not be able to achieve this goal if he does not have an MBA. Another student explained to me that he thinks a graduate degree would give him an opportunity for a more financially rewarding position, but also that a graduate degree would give him more of an opportunity to have a job that is challenging and satisfying. And finally, as one student said, “I know it’s not stupid, but they [companies] need to have that stupid piece of paper that say you have an advanced education. It shows that you are willing to commit 6 years of your life to education and if you’re willing to do that, that you are willing to commit 20-plus years to a company.”

Next, influences from faculty and staff at the University and more specifically at the McCarl Center played a significant role in a nontraditional student’s decision to go onto graduate school. From the responses from my interviews, students noted that because some of their faculty were adjunct professors, they got a better of understanding of how and why a graduate degree could be of use to them and their careers. Since these adjunct professors have experience outside of academia, students could see firsthand the value in graduate education and how furthering their degrees could offer diverse opportunities in their professions. Plus, participants informed me that faculty and staff highly encouraged going onto graduate school through informal conversations before class, during formal classroom discussions or while talking with

their advisors at counseling sessions. For instance, in my interviews I heard, “My professors have encouraged graduate school, they have said, why not just keep going” and “I have been in lectures where there is a lot of nodding towards graduate school.” In addition, one student admitted that she was burned out from school but her advisor kept telling her that she could do it, that she was smart enough and that if she set her goals high enough, she could achieve her dream of getting a doctorate. This same advisor also allowed this student to enroll in some graduate level courses to see if this is something this student would actually like to pursue in the future. As a result, the student informed me that because of this experience and getting exposure to a graduate student workload, she would like to enroll in a graduate program after graduation.

Lastly, while each student had a very positive experience at the University of Pittsburgh they did not consider when applying to the University of Pittsburgh the University’s reputation or national ranking or if it would help them post-graduation. The majority of the nontraditional students interviewed picked the University of Pittsburgh because of convenience. Whether it was they could live at home while going to school, they could attend part-time and tend to their families or it was close to the proximity of their work, most of the students picked the University of Pittsburgh because of location. When asked if they picked Pitt because they thought it would help their profession or academic career in the future, each one replied with the notion that they did not even consider this idea when choosing an undergraduate school. However, one student did say that she is now banking on the reputation of the University of Pittsburgh when applying to graduate school. She said, “I am banking on the reputation of Pitt because it’s not like some small unknown school. It definitely has a lot of power to its name and so I am really am banking on that helping me when applying to graduate schools.” And in addition, another student is

considering a graduate program at the University of Pittsburgh because he thinks he will have a better chance of being accepted because he attended Pitt for his undergraduate degree.

In conclusion, academic integration and access to university resources rather than social integration played a major factor in the decision to go onto graduate school. Students who felt challenged in the classroom wanted to continue their academic career, while other nontraditional students were more eager to gain some hands-on professional experience. Secondly, job mobility and economic benefits were also significant contributors as to why nontraditional students consider graduate study. The thought of getting a better, higher paying job with an advance degree was something that resonated with my sample. And finally, relationships with faculty and staff at the undergraduate level provided guidance and encouragement when considering their post-graduation plans. After reviewing my data, I could fully understand that faculty and staff were among one of the leading reasons why nontraditional students consider graduate school. I learned that faculty and staff at the McCarl Center took the time to personally learn their students' professional goals, provided different options for after college and offered resources such as information, graduate school entrance exam prep courses and even his or her, faculty and staff, own advice on their career and academic paths.

#### **4.7 CONCLUSION TO RESULTS**

In conclusion, there are several meaningful themes that emerged through my data collection process. In regards to Weidman's (1984, 1989) socialization model, several aspects prior, during and after the undergraduate experience impact a student's experiences on campus. As discussed

in the beginning of this Chapter, the idea of the “nontraditional” student and the characteristics that come with this notion are foreign to even nontraditional students themselves. The term nontraditional, in respect to its scholarly definition, has evolved and includes a variety of atypical experiences of college students today. In addition, prospective nontraditional students come to campus with predispositions in consideration to family background and preparedness which can ultimately impact their undergraduate experience as well. Nontraditional students whose parents graduated from college have a predisposed idea of the notion of college and the benefits a degree can provide to a student. Furthermore, this Chapter also demonstrates how normative contexts such as the College of General Studies and the McCarl Center effect the socialization processes of nontraditional students either through areas of study, peer groups or co-curriculum. Likewise, a significant portion of this Chapter discusses the impact socialization both socially and academically and formally and informally play on the nontraditional student experience at the undergraduate level. From interactions and relations with faculty, staff and administration, to the variety of learning styles between minimally, moderately and highly nontraditional students and even peer-to-peer relationships, socialization is an integral part of the nontraditional student experience on campus. Finally, this Chapter concludes by analyzing the socialization processes of nontraditional students and how these experiences, both good and bad, have influenced post-graduation plans and academic aspirations.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This Chapter includes a discussion of the results as they relate to the already existing literature pertaining to the socialization of students on college campuses and my research questions identified in Chapter 3. Similar to Chapter 4, each section is organized by outlining my research questions as they follow the different phases of Weidman's (1989) socialization model – precollege, on-and-off campus socialization and post-graduation plans. Within each section, I identify how the results of my study answer my research questions and how these results relate to the already existing literature regarding Weidman's (1984, 1989) socialization model, Tinto's (1993) student integration theory and the area of study in regard to nontraditional study. In addition, I include Table 2 which outlines my research questions and the answers that were identified by my research. Finally, I conclude this Chapter by including a broad summary of how my study's results play a larger role in the field of nontraditional students and Weidman's (1989) socialization model.

### **5.1 INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES**

First, I examined how nontraditional students' individual attributes and family background influence students' views on higher education. In my interview questions, I looked for

characteristics of family background, predispositions prior to entering college and preparation for collegiate studies. Prior to enrolling at a college, there are parental relationships and family life-styles that contribute to the development and occupational orientation of a student at the undergraduate level. Family life-style seemed to be a stronger reason for why students delayed enrollment rather than their career and degree aspirations. None of the highly nontraditional female students enrolled in college after delaying enrollment were encouraged to go onto college after receiving a high school diploma, and none thought they were smart enough to attend. Since their parents never pursued a college degree and had very little interest in intellectual pursuits, the parental-child relationship was not a source of cultivating intellectual development. For instance, Gina stated during her interview that her parents never went to college and they believed she should assume her role as a wife, mother and caretaker of the house. And as another example, it was not until Sally went into the workforce and was employed at an entry-level position, that she realized she was smart enough to pursue her own educational aspirations. It was not until each of these female students had their own experiences outside of the family, that they realized their true potential and the benefits of receiving a degree. Eventually, they had to develop their own rationale for going to college and see on their own the economic, cultural and intellectual benefits of getting a degree.

In addition, data from my study showed that there was parental influence on students' decisions on careers and areas of study. While my data did not prove that parental influence provoked my participants' to pick an area of study in the College of General Studies, my data did suggest that "achievement, pressure, support and intellectual and cultural interests" from parents played a role in their occupational orientation (Weidman, 1984, p. 448). My data indicated that students were influenced not by the achievements of their parents, but by the lack thereof.

Through the stories provided by my participants, what was absent was the personal and professional achievements by their parents and the pressure they put on them to exceed their own goals and aspirations.

In addition, family life-style in regards to financially comfortability also played a factor as to why students decided to pursue an undergraduate degree. One student could see firsthand how his single-mother, who did not have a college degree and is still working entry-level positions, struggled to provide a home, food and opportunities for him. Although grateful, he wanted to aspire to a better lifestyle and economic status than what his mother could provide. As a result, his mother's lack of education and lack of interest to be financially secure aspired him to pursue a college degree. What he learned from his mother reinforced his motivation to get a college degree.

Moving forward, it is important to not only look at the parent-child relationships but the child and relationships with all family members. Another student mentioned in my study that his grandfather was the only person in his family to get a college degree and to go onto medical school. While his grandfather had an interest in intellectual pursuits and financial comfortability, this student's parent's generation of the family did not develop that same ambition. As a result, this student saw this as an opportunity to change the path of the future generations in his family and to be the role model for his other siblings and their offspring to follow not in their parent's footsteps but their grandfather's. Therefore, when looking at Weidman's (1989) model, the minimally nontraditional students have a correlation to the parental socialization portion of the model. Socio-economic status, life-style and parent-child relationship influences these students to pursue a degree directly after college. However, similar to the story of the student and his grandfather, it was not the parental influence that encouraged him to enroll in college, but the

first-generation of a college graduate that developed this family socialization piece in Weidman's model.

## **5.2 SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES**

My next research question investigated the socialization processes (interaction, integration and learning) of nontraditional students during their undergraduate experiences. Similar to the findings of Weidman's (1984, 1989) socialization model and Tinto's (1993) student integration theory, my study found that the undergraduate experience both socially and academically shaped a student's experience on campus. For my respondents, interpersonal relationships with other peers (traditional and nontraditional), faculty and staff played a very significant role on their student experiences and helped in many ways for them to feel more integrated on campus. One of the ways is through mentoring. First, nontraditional students often mentioned, both formal and informal, as a way relationships with faculty and staff influenced their on campus experiences. Academic advisors were among the top reasons why nontraditional students (regardless of minimally, moderately or highly nontraditional) not only felt that they were able to successfully achieve their educational goals while on campus, but also that these staff members gave them one-on-one attention which made them feel more connected and integrated on campus. Also, students felt that staff and faculty knew their personal and academic situations on a personal basis. During the interview process, students stated that staff and faculty ask specific, personal questions about a situation they were dealing with at work, or how their children were doing or even how they did on a big test. And in addition to asking these questions, staff and



faculty provide their own advice on how they would handle these types of situations. Thus, for these nontraditional students socialization is a process largely facilitated through relationships with faculty and staff.

Because moderately and highly nontraditional students had similar external experiences and responsibilities with staff and their professors, these students had more meaningful relationships and interactions with administration and faculty members. These students believed that staff and faculty could better relate to them since they shared similar work and life commitments and could talk about these stressors informally before or after class. By sharing similar stories of buying houses, raising children and still succeeding in their professional lives, highly and moderately nontraditional students appreciated these one-on-one relationships with faculty. Subsequently, this also made moderately and highly nontraditional students feel more integrated on campus and have a better social experience because they thought they had personal, genuine relationships with their faculty members. Therefore, it was not the frequency in which these interactions happened, but it was the intensity and the quality of these relationships that affected a nontraditional student's socialization on campus.

The quality of these relationships led to both positive and negative experiences by the nontraditional students. Moderately and highly nontraditional students believed that they were asked to volunteer more in class discussions than their traditional and younger, nontraditional students. Nontraditional students who reported to have good relationships with their faculty members suggested that since faculty knew their external situations (both at home and in the work place), called on them more in class because they knew their input would benefit the class discussion. While some moderately and highly nontraditional students felt embarrassed or

annoyed that they were getting called so frequently in class, this also caused these students to feel important in class discussions and felt more connected academically to the University.

However, the quality of the relationships between staff and faculty and moderately and highly nontraditional students had socialization consequences for the minimally nontraditional students who did not feel as connected. Minimally nontraditional students felt intimidated by their faculty members or they realized they did not have as well as rapport with them as their moderately or highly nontraditional peers. There are several reasons for this finding. First, minimally nontraditional students felt that moderately or highly nontraditional students could push back more easily on grading systems, deadlines for homework assignments and overall curriculum objectives. It was often mentioned by this group that the more nontraditional students could speak more openly and freely in class. Next, minimally nontraditional students felt intimidated by their faculty members and their relationships with moderately and highly nontraditional students because they did not share the same family, work or external commitments. As explained in Chapter 4, one student explained that she could not add to pre-class, informal discussions because she simply could not relate to having children or submitting a project for work on time. This student also mentioned that unlike her highly nontraditional peers, she did not get called on as frequently because she lacked work experience. The dynamics between moderately and highly nontraditional students and faculty create a type of favoritism in class that is bothersome to minimally nontraditional students. The minimally nontraditional students notice the favoritism, and it seems to limit their ability to cultivate more meaningful relationships with faculty.

Finally, peer-to-peer relationships were somewhat found to have an effect on nontraditional student socialization on campus. My data strongly suggests that similarity in the

characteristics of a nontraditional student to other students who share the same characteristics affected the relationships among nontraditional students. For instance, students who were minimally nontraditional related better and interacted more with their traditional peers. These specific students felt socially integrated on campus by living off-campus with their traditional peers, attending social events targeted to traditional students and opting not to attend events hosted by the McCarl Center because they did not think they were as nontraditional as their fellow peers. On the other hand, highly nontraditional students, or students who were older, had children, a spouse or outside work experience related better to peers who were going through similar outside situations. As a highly nontraditional student framed it as a, “I got your back, you got mine” mentality. Students who shared similar external backgrounds provided comfortable, safe environments for each other.

On the other hand, my study provided some evidence demonstrated that nontraditional student veterans, while having a similar connection to serving in the military, did not feel as connected to other student veterans as we might expect. As one student put it, “You are just expected to get along with other veterans but in reality, we all had different experiences in the military.” And another Veteran stated, “Another veteran in my class did not have the same experiences as me. I was on the front line and he was not. I was pissed when a professor assumed we would work well together because of our military background.” Although this particular student shared the same characteristic of being a student veteran as his peer, the different type of combat they experienced while in the military placed a barrier on their interactions and relationship. This student was upset that since they had one similar trait in common that they were expected by faculty to socialize well together and as if their interactions were forced and not organically developed. Naphan and Elliot’s (2015) study on student

veterans and the integration onto college campuses primarily focused on veterans interacting with other civilians (college students); however, my data presents a new dimension to the research by looking at veteran-to-veteran relationships on campus. Thus, peer-to-peer relationships develop differently between the varied degrees of nontraditional and levels of outside work and military experience. It should not be assumed that since a student shares similar professional or military experiences that they will interact well with other students who have been through alike experiences.

Lastly, my data demonstrate that nontraditional students are annoyed and irritated by the lack of value in education and the lack of preparation and effort their traditional counterparts put in to their academic experiences. Nontraditional students learning styles and academic involvement were among the most influential to their socialization on campus. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) explain that social influence occurs both by formal instruction and informal interaction with faculty and peers. This concept is evident in my own research because many of the nontraditional students interviewed discussed at length the difference of learning styles between them (nontraditional students) and their traditional peers. However, this interaction caused a negative reaction by nontraditional students. First and most often reported, nontraditional students felt that they placed more of a value on education. Participants in my study explained that they valued their education more than traditional students because they are the ones paying for their own tuition and because they had sacrificed attention and commitment to multiple external obligations. As a result, nontraditional students reported that they aimed to absorb as much as they could intellectually so that they could grow not only academically but personally and professionally as well. Compared to their traditional peers, nontraditional students believed they had a more sophisticated and meaningful understanding of the value of

education. They see themselves in the classroom as more intentional, more focused and more goal-oriented. Nontraditional students know why they are getting a degree, they have an outcome in mind and they know what they hope to achieve once they receive their degrees. On the other hand, nontraditional students thought that their traditional counterparts were only in the process of figuring out why they were in school and what they hope to achieve when they graduate. Nontraditional students believed because traditional students entered college right after high school, they were taking the time during their collegiate studies to explore opportunities that exist.

Next, I interpreted some subtle meanings embedded in the friction nontraditional students identified in group settings. Nontraditional students, and especially students who had some type of work or military experience outside of the classroom were expected by their professors to lead group projects. This caused nontraditional students to feel two different ways in regards to group work. One, they appreciated their faculty members putting this responsibility on them because they knew they had outside resources such as access to conference rooms or conference call lines by their employers to help assist their group (something they say their traditional peers could not provide). And two, nontraditional students felt that since they valued their education more than their traditional peers that they would go above and beyond to achieve a good grade on the project. This also caused nontraditional students to not trust their traditional peers would do a good job or to believe their traditional peers would not show exemplary effort. And some nontraditional students even suggested that they wished their professors would give traditional students more of a leadership role in group projects because they have already gained this experience in the work force or military. Interesting point!

Also, nontraditional students who participated in my study indicated that attendance at academic lectures and programs offered by the McCarl Center were not proven to be a major factor for their socialization on campus. Nontraditional students described during the interview process that they have too many outside commitments to attend lectures and programs outside of normal class hours. They only have a set amount of time to be on campus and away from their external commitments (spouse, family), and had to prioritize their personal lives with the benefits of attending additional academic programming. Nontraditional students in my study suggested that they needed to see meaningful results if they invested their time attending academic lectures and additional academic programming and sacrificing time allotted to their family and careers.

### **5.3 NORMATIVE CONTEXTS**

The McCarl Center served as a normative context (Weidman, 1989) for nontraditional students, and the Center played a significant role in the socialization processes of these particular students (Research Q 3). Nontraditional students felt a strong connection to the McCarl Center and the staff and faculty associated with the Center. At such a large institution, the McCarl Center provided a place for students to cultivate relationships and develop personal connections. It also provided a familiar place with familiar faces and names that allowed nontraditional students to feel more integrated at such a large size University where students can go overlooked among the 35,000 students enrolled each year. Another normative context for the student veterans who participated in my student was the Office of Veteran Services. The Office of Veteran Services

was a source of socialization for returning veterans because it created a space where they could meet other veterans, seek assistance from academic advisors trained to deal with this specific student population and learn about events and programming offered only to student veterans. This Office is physically located in the McCarl Center and is a safe space for veterans to study, socialize and gather. These act as normative contexts because as Weidman (1989) points out, peer groups, co-curriculum and majors play a role in the socialization of students on campus. The normative contexts identified in my study are somewhat unique because it is not so much about the relationships with peers or the curriculum and disciplines the College of General Studies offers, but rather the physical space of the McCarl Center and the Office of Veterans that adds to the overall undergraduate experience of nontraditional students at the University of Pittsburgh.

#### **5.4 PERSONAL COMMUNITIES**

My fourth research question focuses on outside factors and personal communities (friends, peers and employers) and the significant role played in the nontraditional student socialization process and aspirations upon graduation. As indicated by Weidman (1989), external reference groups are just as meaningful as interactions and relationships with peers, faculty and staff associated with the University. In accordance with the literature, I found that institutions of higher learning cannot be considered encapsulated environments. On a daily basis, nontraditional students interact and socialize with many groups outside of the University that contribute to their successes on campus. The relationships among nontraditional students and non-college groups

were said to have served as motivation to excel in the classroom, mostly through words of encouragement. However, these relationships also provided a source of stress to nontraditional students. Nontraditional students explained that it was a challenge to manage and excel in all of their professional, personal and academic lives combined. Since there are competing demands of employers and the students' own families, like Weidman, I found that external relationships produced challenges to keeping a work-life balance. Nontraditional students felt successful in one aspect of their lives, for instance school, then another responsibility, such as their careers, was suffering.

Regardless of competing demands, my respondents said that children were strong motivators for retention and completion of degree. First, parents saw themselves as role models for their children. Nontraditional parents wanted to set a good example for their children, and going to college, doing well in school and graduating were motivating factors to continue on with their studies even when work-life balance was challenging. Also, as one single-mother mentioned during her interview, it was satisfying to bring her child to campus and to some of her classes to see first-hand the benefits of getting a degree. She even said this exposure has since broadened her son's vision for the future and he now wants to pursue not only a college degree, but an advanced degree as well. Nontraditional students who have children develop certain socialization outside of the University that is not included in Weidman's model.

Second, spouses were also seen as a motivating factor for nontraditional students' retention and completion of their degrees. One student stated, "If it was not for my wife, I would never be graduating this May." This spouse provided encouragement and a level of understanding that could not have come from relationships or interactions with fellow peers, faculty members and staff. In addition, another student said, "I have wanted to quit school so



many times. I thought I was letting the relationship with my wife slip, but she reminded me that this situation is only temporary.” His wife allowed him to see that the long-term benefits far outweighed the short-term challenges. In addition to parental influences, nontraditional students require additional sources for socialization such as spousal interactions and relationships.

Furthermore, my study revealed that because of outside demands and relationships with family members, college is not a source for them to make and develop new friendships. Since these students are in a different place in their lives and sometimes more established than their traditional peers, the purpose of college for them is not so much forming new bonds with classmates, but rather creating interactions and relationships that develop their career and lifelong goals. Nontraditional students who have personal obligations and family situations do not have the time or the emotional capacity to develop and maintain relationships with other students. They are on campus for a sole purpose, to receive a college degree and socialization is acquired through external channels. A student said during her interview, “I don’t have any friends and I don’t want any friends at school. I have a husband and my own friends in my neighborhood. I would rather work on keeping those friendships alive.” Therefore, children spouses and acquaintances outside of the University are the relationships nontraditional students try to keep and further develop. However, nontraditional students’ lack of creating friendships on campus with peers creates boundaries and barriers with their classmates. Nontraditional students mentioned during their interviews that since they have friendships and bonds with people outside of the institution, there is a lack of emotional connection with their classmates and limits to their discussions that do not pertain to school, projects and lectures.

In addition to spouses and children, church communities also had a positive influence prior to college entrance and during nontraditional students’ collegiate experiences. Weidman’s

(1989) model includes church and community groups as a source to impact and shape students' collegiate influences. This aspect of Weidman's (1989) model was indicated in my study by showing church groups as one of the influences of why nontraditional students decided to go back to school after delaying enrollment after high school. As one student framed it, "My church has been the biggest source of encouragement. If it wasn't for my priest recognizing my talent and my full potential, I wouldn't have ever thought about getting a college degree." Also, my data also revealed that church groups served as support groups during the time nontraditional students were in college. Priests and members of the congregation were said to have continuously provided words of encouragement when going back to school, getting a degree and managing external commitments became overbearing. Thus, similarly to children and spouses, church groups impacted retention and completion of undergraduate programs for nontraditional students.

## **5.5 FUTURE PLANS POST-GRADUATION**

Nontraditional students who reported that they wanted to pursue graduate study also reported that they acquired these aspirations through informal interactions and relationships with faculty and staff at the McCarl Center. My data for my fifth research question indicates that it was because of faculty and academic advisors that students learned the benefits of furthering their education after college graduation and the economic rewards (salary) that come from high-level positions that require advance degrees. In regards to Weidman (1989), it is not so much about

the friendships and relationships developed with their classmates but the responsiveness by staff and faculty that help them stay focused on their goals and aspirations.

In addition, it was also apparent that minimally nontraditional students wanted to enter the workforce first before considering taking on more student loans or making a decision that could impact the future of their careers. Many of these minimally nontraditional students were younger and lacked the professional experience prior to coming to college. These students wanted to gain exposure to the workforce before returning to school and they also wanted to start earning a salary after graduation. This notion resulted from minimally nontraditional students being surrounded by other moderately and highly nontraditional students who had gained professional and military experience prior to enrolling in college. They saw first-hand the benefits of having exposure to real-world experiences outside of the classroom and how these different perspectives could affect the ideas and concepts learned in the classroom. One student said, “After seeing some of my classmates who have outside work experience and how much they could bring to class discussions, I think I need the same experiences if I am able to be a major contributor to graduate school.” Thus, minimally nontraditional students wanted to gain work experiences before entering graduate school to become more knowledgeable and well-diverse in the classroom.

Nearly all of the nontraditional students interviewed wanted to pursue graduate study. Whether it was directly after graduating from college or in sometime in the future, their experiences at the collegiate-level did have an effect on this aspiration. When looking at the different socialization outcomes in Weidman’s model (career choices, life-style preference, aspirations and values), graduate school should be included in the list of potential outcomes or included under the subtext of aspirations. From their prior experiences before coming to college,

to their parental and family influences, to their on-campus academic and social interactions to their noncollege groups relationships, as described, each one of these sources of socialization played a role in the question of not only their future plans post-graduation, but if and why they wanted to pursue advanced study.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

Below is a chart that outlines my research questions and the answers to these questions as they were revealed during my study.

**Table 2. Answer to research questions**

<b>RESEARCH QUESTION</b>	<b>ANSWERS FROM RESPONSES</b>
<p><i>How do nontraditional students' individual attributes and family background influence their views on higher education (i.e. background, predispositions, preparation)?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior work experience in entry-level positions</li> <li>• Competitive in job market</li> <li>• Job mobility</li> <li>• Desire for more satisfactory lifestyle</li> <li>• Economic mobility</li> <li>• Highly shown from students from low economic backgrounds</li> <li>• Excelling in current position and/or industry</li> <li>• Personal growth, personal satisfaction, pride</li> <li>• Despite lack of family encouragement</li> <li>• First-generation graduate</li> <li>• Students received little to no support from family members</li> <li>• Responsibility to set an example for family members and children to go to college</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Continued

<p><i>What are the socialization processes (interaction, integration, and learning) that nontraditional students go through during their undergraduate experiences?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love of learning, intellectual curiosity</li> <li>• Higher value on education</li> <li>• Lack of social interaction on campus</li> <li>• Primarily demonstrated by highly nontraditional students</li> <li>• Nontraditional students tend to spend time with students who share the same interests, backgrounds and age</li> <li>• External demands conflict with time spent on campus</li> <li>• Nontraditional students are asked to participate more in class than their traditional peers</li> <li>• Called upon to be leaders in group projects</li> <li>• Poor attendance at social events</li> <li>• Negative connotation of the term “nontraditional”</li> <li>• Nontraditional students sometimes do not realize they are nontraditional and prevents them from participating socially</li> <li>• Mentorships</li> <li>• Large disconnect in academic settings</li> <li>• Minimally nontraditional students feel coursework is tailored too much to moderately and highly nontraditional students</li> <li>• Faculty and staff play a significant role in the socialization processes of nontraditional students</li> </ul>
<p><i>What normative contexts (majors, peer groups, co-curriculum) do students describe as relevant to their socialization at the undergraduate-level and aspirations upon graduation?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although McCarl Center social events are not well attended, the Center provided a comfortable and secure environment for students</li> <li>• Advisors at the McCarl Center created positive experiences on campus</li> <li>• McCarl Center serves as a resource for students</li> <li>• College of General Studies offers convenient class times and a wide variety of subject areas to study</li> <li>• Office of Veteran Services helped student veterans transition to civilian/student-life</li> <li>• Amenities used on campus are only those that help the daily lives of nontraditional students</li> </ul>
<p><i>How do nontraditional students’ personal communities (family, friends, and employers) contribute to their socialization at the undergraduate-level and aspirations upon graduation?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family either encouraged or lack support for going back to school</li> <li>• Employers provide tuition assistance programs</li> <li>• Church groups were shown as positive influences</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Continued

<i>What are nontraditional students' motivations and aspirations for future plans upon graduation?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Graduate school is highly considered</li><li>• Need to figure out what specific graduate program would be most beneficial to career and most economically rewarding</li><li>• Love of learning</li><li>• Delay graduate school enrollment to gain work experience</li><li>• Minimally nontraditional students are eager to enter the workforce if they lack previous work experiences</li><li>• Need a break from education</li><li>• Save money first before taking on more debt</li><li>• Faculty and staff have an influence on post-graduate plans</li></ul>
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The results of my study were able to provide evidence for the research questions I posed at the beginning of my research process, and provided insight to Weidman's (1989) socialization model. My results also add new dimensions to his socialization model. Weidman's model suggests that all undergraduate students can easily fit into the mold of his pre, during, and after college socialization model while my results determined that every student, especially nontraditional students have unique situations on and off campus. As my research strongly suggests, nontraditional students do not share the same experiences as their traditional peers but they also do not share the same experiences as their nontraditional student counterparts. The term "nontraditional" is too generic of phrase to describe a large, continuously growing student population. The definition of a nontraditional student should not be limited to the eight characteristics put forth by Choy (2002), but rather this field of study should shift in orientation towards capturing a shared social process more meaningfully tied to towards the individual socialization processes and individual aspirations of these particular students. The definition of nontraditional students' needs to be expanded but researchers cannot stop there. Researchers and

practitioners interested in serving nontraditional students need to take a more individualized approach.

Often participants told me that even before they arrived on campus they felt disconnected from their peers, faculty and staff. Participants informed me that during their first meeting with either their advisor or a McCarl Center staff member, they told them, “you won’t understand my situation, it is different.” Although it might be a situation that faculty and staff deal with on a daily basis, nontraditional students think that their situation is different than their peers – traditional and nontraditional – which prevents them from fully integrating on campus before even taking their first class.

Weidman’s (1989) socialization model is comprehensive enough to explain the nontraditional student phenomenon. It is important that researchers using the model consider that not every student at the undergraduate level is the same – same as in their goals, their ambitions and their challenges prior to attending college. Moving forward, using Weidman’s model is imperative to continuing to understand this particular population, but it also should provoke scholars in the field to look at the phenomenon differently.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This Chapter identifies the possible implications my study has on professional practice, policy and processes in today's higher education system. In addition, I have listed implications to the already existing literature in the field of nontraditional study, socialization of college students and graduate education. Also, I recognize and list the limitations to my study and the reasoning of why these limitations existed during my study. Finally, as a result of these implications and limitations, I conclude with suggestions for future, more extensive research. Future research has the ability to add to my existing study and expand the scope of the research on the continuously growing population of nontraditional students and their career and academic aspirations upon college graduation.

### **6.1 IMPLICATIONS**

There are several implications my study and its findings have on the study of higher education. Each of the implications listed are based on the results of my research and are intended to add meaning to the study of nontraditional students and their post-graduate plans. Each implication mentioned is a recommendation to the field of higher education and is intended for potential use for colleges and universities in the future.



There are several implications my research has for professional practice in today's system of higher education. First, there is a need for more awareness and understanding of the full breadth of nontraditional student experiences. From my research, every nontraditional student has their own personal situations, at home, work and on campus. It is vital that faculty and administration understand the differences not only between nontraditional students and their traditional counterparts, but also within the different degrees of nontraditional students – minimally, moderately and highly nontraditional. In the future, it could be of importance for staff and faculty to conduct individual intake interviews to assess and understand individual situations prior to nontraditional students' first day on campus. While it may be a tedious task for staff and faculty to get to know their students on an individual basis, it serves the success and retention of nontraditional students to not be treated the same as their 18-22 year-old traditional counterparts, who have little to no exposure to external work and family obligations, and to be recognized and appreciated for their external experiences and responsibilities. This recommendation stems from my research because the nontraditional students who participated in an interview made statements such as, "as soon as I met with my advisor I told them that my situation was different and that they wouldn't understand" or statements that alluded to the fact that they already felt disconnected before coming onto campus because they felt isolated or different because of their nontraditional status.

In addition, understanding the breadth of the nontraditional student experience also has implications for Choy's (2002) extensive definition of a nontraditional student. I used Choy's definition to frame my study's sample because it is the most relevant and inclusive to the situations and challenges nontraditional students face today. However, moving forward, the definition of nontraditional students may once again need to be expanded beyond Choy's eight

characteristics. As an example, this implication is evident by the number of student veterans that participated in my study. While they qualified for at least one of Choy's characteristics, they provided new insight to Choy's broad term, "nontraditional." Although they did technically delay enrollment to work at a full-time job, serving in the armed forces adds a distinctly different dimension to the nontraditional student profile that needs to be examined differently and expanded upon in the future. Plus, as noted by the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, adult students will grow 10 times more than traditional students by 2018 (as cited in Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz & Hoop, 2007). The nontraditional student population continues to rapidly grow and the institution of higher education needs to be adequately prepared and knowledgeable about one of the largest, most diverse populations enrolled on college campuses today. While Choy (2002) is a good starting point for defining the nontraditional student population, there is a need to expand that definition to include students such as veterans, minorities or even students with disabilities. I did not address these specific student populations in this study but it is an area that needs further research.

The nontraditional students in my study all place a high value on education and have an eagerness to grasp concepts that improve their professional skillset. Nontraditional students are not only striving to receive a good grade, but they also want to learn and understand concepts that they can apply to their own professional practices. It is important for staff and faculty to respond to these students' wants and needs accordingly. For example, professors would benefit from knowing if their nontraditional students have families at home. If they know their professions, professors can tailor class discussions to improve their performance at work. Learning about their post-graduate plans can enable professors to serve as mentors to help these students achieve their goals. Whether it is to acknowledge that nontraditional students cannot

always stay after class to meet for group projects, offering extended hours for the financial aid or registrar offices or applying theoretical theories to day-to-day professional practices, acknowledging the needs and wants of nontraditional students is critical to their integration at their respective institutions and also the success in their respective fields.

In 2009, Jinkens demonstrated that nontraditional students were not as worried about achieving high grades in their classes but were more focused on understanding and applying their course curriculums to their everyday lives and jobs. He even reported that faculty members acknowledged and appreciated their hard work and dedication to class projects, tests and assignments. The results of my study agree with Jinken's findings that nontraditional students place a high value on higher education and excel and thrive in classroom settings, and my study has tapped into a more complex picture behind that generalization about nontraditional students' dedication. Beyond that, as my study demonstrates, nontraditional students may feel that they are called on more than their traditional peers or that they are always called upon to lead group projects, with both positive and negative effects on their experiences in the classroom. Some minimally nontraditional students – who may not volunteer as much as older, more obviously nontraditional students -- may end up being overlooked or crowded out. Resentment between students may also be encouraged unintentionally.

In addition, my research demonstrates that nontraditional students aspire or even consider graduate school as an option after graduation because of their relationships with and encouragement from faculty members. Colleges and universities need to cultivate these relationships and teach faculty that outreach and discussions are important to the future plans and aspirations of nontraditional students. Faculty members could serve as mentors for nontraditional students wanting to pursue graduate study to tell first-hand how their advanced

degrees have helped them in their own professions. Also, faculty could explain how to research, apply and enroll in graduate study programs. Since they have been through the process before, advice from faculty to nontraditional students could help clarify the logistics of how to pursue an advanced degree. Faculty can ease the anxiety of enrolling in graduate school and provide encouragement that they can financially do it and they are smart enough to pursue advanced study. Faculty and staff need to be aware of these obstacles and offer different options of how graduate school is not only valuable to a nontraditional student's career, but also the different steps they need to take in order to apply and afford an advanced degree. And finally, programming should be offered to nontraditional students about the different options after graduation, whether it is in their respective fields or becoming more knowledgeable about graduate study. Since programming that is offered before or after class is not well attended, it would be of value for programming to somehow be incorporated in faculty's curricula.

In reference to the implication my data brings to the already existing literature on graduate study and nontraditional students, Tinto (1993) mentions in his research that there is an absence in the literature pertaining to graduate school education. With my own findings, not only do I agree with Tinto's assessment, but I also suggest that researchers need to examine nontraditional students and their ambitions and motivations to continue onto graduate school at a deeper level. My research suggests a strong interest among nontraditional students and their aspirations to someday enroll in a graduate-level program. However, my research did not use Weidman's (1989) model to show how socialization develops this type of ambition at the undergraduate level. From the data I collected, faculty members play an important role in nontraditional students considering graduate study. That finding could be fleshed out in another study utilizing the aspect of Weidman's socialization theory that addresses on faculty integration and

interactions. It would be beneficial to the field of nontraditional study and graduate education research to explore further not only how nontraditional students and faculty interact and form relationships to benefit their successes on campus at the undergraduate level, but to understand how these relationships affect nontraditional students' plans post-graduation. Weidman's model addresses faculty and student interactions on campus, but not to the level of detail of how these interactions influence post-graduate plans.

Secondly, findings from my research have implications on existing policy and procedures in regard to nontraditional students, higher education and advanced study. My data showed that the GI Bill is a substantial financial and educational incentive for the veterans in my study at the undergraduate level, but this bill designates little to no money for veterans who are interested in graduate study (Vacchi & Berger, 2014). Veteran students interviewed stated that this piece of legislation allows them to pursue an undergraduate degree with minimal costs, but they are hesitant to pursue graduate study since there are significant out-of-pocket expenses and financial burdens that would be placed on them and their families. There is a need to amend or increase funding through the GI Bill for veterans who not only want to pursue a college degree but an advanced degree as well. In addition to the GI Bill, college and universities should also offer their own incentives for former military and nontraditional college graduates to attend graduate school. As a recommendation, universities and colleges need to not only offer merit and financial based scholarships to students of need but specifically nontraditional students who are eager to pursue higher education.

Student veteran research thus far has primarily focused on the success of federal assistance programs offered to veterans (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and the mental health issues of veterans and how these issues potentially affect their success in the classroom (Church, 2009).

While these are certainly important concerns, the perspectives of the student veterans have opened up a series of additional provocative questions that have not been addressed in the research literature. The veterans in my study struggle to integrate and form relationships with their civilian peers because of their experiences in the military. There is also a challenge for student veterans to form relationships and bonds with their fellow student veterans. As one student veteran mentioned during his interview, he is expected to socialize and interact well with other veterans because they served in one form or another in the military. However, he explained that this expectation is not appropriate because he or she cannot be expected to have an immediate and close connection to all student veterans. Veterans have different roles in the military, served in different geographic regions and simple had different experiences. Therefore, there is a need to examine further student veteran socialization processes with traditional students, nontraditional students and as detailed, their student veteran counterparts.

Next, there are several implications for the theories used in this study pertaining to social integration (Tinto, 1993) and student socialization (Weidman, 1989). First, based on the results and as predicted early in my research, Tinto's (1993) student integration theory is inadequate and not appropriate to apply to the population of nontraditional students. Integration has a positive influence on nontraditional students' retention and success at the undergraduate level but may work counter to their actual long-term goals. It is evident from my research that social and academic integration on campus for less nontraditional students is important to their retention and successes at the undergraduate level; however, the socialization of more moderately and highly nontraditional students can be examined more effectively by using a broader theoretical framework that includes external factors such as personal background, noncollege reference groups, and parental influences. Since moderately and highly nontraditional students have day-

to-day external demands and exposure to family, friends and colleagues outside of the university, it is important to not isolate nontraditional student experiences just to campus, but to also consider the importance of external relationships and interactions. Thus, studies moving forward that are examining nontraditional student undergraduate experiences should use a broader theoretical framework, Weidman (1989), to get an accurate account of this population.

Although Weidman's socialization model is a more appropriate fit than Tinto's theory when examining the nontraditional student population, it would be beneficial to add more specificity to this model. For instance, as my results demonstrate, different patterns and processes of socialization occur within the different degrees of nontraditional. Repeatedly I discovered that there were several discrepancies between the way minimally, moderately and highly nontraditional students socialized, integrated, interacted and built interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships during the undergraduate experiences. It would be of value to the study of nontraditional students if student socialization also incorporated the different degrees and the different characteristics of nontraditional students. More research is needed to formulate accurate ideas about the implications of the different degrees of nontraditional status. This study was a singular case that only examined nontraditional students associated with the McCarl Center. By adding this layer of specificity to the socialization model, there could be a greater understanding of not only the population of nontraditional students but among the different degrees of nontraditional student statuses. Thus, what is ultimately needed is a more individualized socialization model that pertains only to nontraditional students that enables researchers and practitioners a better understanding of people at different stages of their lives. It is possible through the creation of this new model that there are traditional college development aspects that are irrelevant or inaccurate for the nontraditional student population.

My study has implications for the case setting in which my study was conducted, the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success. The nontraditional students who participated in my study stated that the McCarl Center helped them feel more integrated and connected to campus and allowed them to develop and cultivate relationships with their fellow peers and faculty and staff. However, as I learned through the data collection process, nontraditional students enrolled in other colleges and studying disciplines outside of those offered by the College of General Studies, for example engineering and business, are not aware the McCarl Center exists. Whether the Center does not promote its service campus-wide or students who are enrolled in different colleges at the University do not do their due diligence in seeking out assistance, the McCarl Center has the ability to grow and serve all nontraditional students, regardless of discipline, enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh.

Also, the results of my study suggest that the term nontraditional has a negative connotation among college students. It was reported that students who are nontraditional think they are perceived by their traditional peers as different, atypical or less competent since they did not pursue a college degree directly after high school. These perceptions make nontraditional students self-conscious and disassociated with the McCarl Center. For example, nontraditional students do not attend the week-long event called Nontraditional Student Week the McCarl Center hosts each year because the name of the event is objectionable. Some students who are minimally nontraditional do not equate themselves with being nontraditional and this discourages them from attending Nontraditional Student Week activities. While staff at the McCarl Center may think it is special since it is intended only for nontraditional students, students who are associated with the Center may find the name of this event unappealing and uninviting. As a recommendation, the McCarl Center could be more communicative to all



students at the University about what defines a nontraditional student and that they are open and welcoming to all students and their unique personal situations. That way, students are knowledgeable about the makeup of the nontraditional student population and understand this population has evolved from just including older adults. In addition, more promotion and awareness of the Center and the achievements and accomplishments of its students could help improve the stigma that has developed around this demographic on campus.

Case studies of units similar to the McCarl Center should be looked at in more depth and on different college campuses of sizes, types and locations. My study showed that the McCarl Center's staff and their relationships with their nontraditional students had major influences on the successes of these students at the undergraduate level. According to Weidman's (1989) socialization model, peer groups serve as a major source for socialization on college campuses and provide interactions and integration with diverse student groups and staff members. The McCarl Center demonstrates a physical space that offers designated areas for nontraditional students to study, congregate and mingle. It is also a space that houses offices for advisors and faculty members and common areas for academic and professional programming. Moving forward, studying centers like the McCarl Center could give this line of inquiry a clearer picture of how normative contexts provide the socialization needed for nontraditional students to succeed at the undergraduate level. As Weidman (1989) states, "the long-term academic impacts of college are not the result of classroom experiences, but of informal forms of interaction with students and faculty" (p. 452). Evidence suggests the McCarl Center provided the participants of this study with that informal integration and interactions that led to positive feelings in regards to the Center. It would be of great benefit to study Centers allocated to nontraditional students to

see how they contribute to the socialization processes of nontraditional students at different college campuses.

Also, there is a significant disconnection not only between traditional and nontraditional students, but minimally and moderately and highly nontraditional students as well. Whether it is an age difference, different experiences in the workforce or military, the different degrees of nontraditional students puts a barrier on relationship building and communication among these subgroups of nontraditional students. Moving forward, the McCarl Center could facilitate more interactions between nontraditional students to help create a more broadly accepting environment and friendly workspace. There is an opportunity for nontraditional students of all kinds to learn from each other. The McCarl Center could host more events that are scheduled for convenient times so all students could interact with each other or educate faculty and staff on how to develop these relationships informally and formally during class and after class. The Center could also continue to evaluate the times and accessibility of programs to remain mindful of the challenges of students' schedules and the individuality of their needs.

Drawing from her research, Choy (2002) not only defines the characteristics of a nontraditional student but also explains that there are different degrees of nontraditional status – minimally, moderately and highly. My research contained a sample that included all degrees of nontraditional. Choy and other scholars in the field of nontraditional study do not break down all of the differences among nontraditional students and how these differences can have an impact on their socialization on campuses. It would be a benefit to the field to research how the similarities and differences within this population affect their integration and interaction with their peers on campus. Since the definition has expanded, nontraditional students who are of traditional college age (18-22 years of age) and live on campus may share qualities with older

nontraditional students such as working full-time or attending classes part-time; however, this does not necessarily mean they are alike or even that they are collegial towards each other during their undergraduate experiences.

Finally, while individual student interviews worked well for my study, different methodological approaches should also be considered when continuing to study this student population. Moving forward, researchers interested in nontraditional students could use data collecting methods such as surveys or focus groups to get a more generalized picture of this phenomenon. I personally chose to conduct individual interviews because I was confident enough in my skillset to know I would systematically use probing techniques and engaging rapport topics to get my sample to provide enough data to make accurate conclusions to this study. Focus groups could get more chatter going and generate more themes from students interacting with each other, particularly across different degrees of nontraditional. With anonymous surveys, students could be more blunt feedback that they might not have the courage to present face to face. A more generalizable approach would enable a more systematic study of the differences between degrees of nontraditional students. Several of the themes presented here could be studied to test their representativeness across the larger population of nontraditional students. Multiple institutions could be studied this way also, although getting nontraditional students to respond to surveys would be a challenge.

## 6.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this section, I identify the limitations of my study and as a response to these limitations, the areas I foresee as a need for future research. First, because of the access to data and since I serve as a staff member on campus, I decided to only study nontraditional students at one institution, the University of Pittsburgh. While my study produced valuable results from this institution alone, moving forward it would be beneficial to the research of nontraditional students to repeat this study at institutions of different sizes, different in the way they are funded (public versus private) and institutions that are geographically located around the country and around the world. Although the University of Pittsburgh is a public institution, it has one of the most expensive tuition rates in the United States. Since my study is the first of its kind, additional research and cross-institutional comparisons are needed not only to validate and add to my findings. Further studies could address different cultures of nontraditional students, the different purposes of why these students pursue a college degree and the ways in which tuition costs affect enrollment.

Second, my study only looked at nontraditional students at the University of Pittsburgh enrolled in the College of General Studies. I drew this parameter for my research because I believed my study would generate more than enough data from this particular sample alone to make accurate assumptions and observations. However, moving forward I believe this study could and should be replicated with other disciplines such as business, the liberal arts and the sciences. When reviewing my results, there was evidence that nontraditional students believed that they had more one-on-one attention than their peers enrolled in other disciplines at the University. I think it would not only be interesting to see if this claim holds true, but to explore other nontraditional students that may not be associated with the McCarl Center and utilize its

resources. A study performed with nontraditional students within the different Schools and Colleges at the University of Pittsburgh could reveal a variety of socialization processes this students partake in on a daily basis. If a study like this was done, there could be other ways nontraditional students in different disciplines are engaging, interacting and developing relationships with other peers, staff and faculty members that my study did not identify. A study done in a professional school for instance may reveal interesting normative contexts built around preparation for a professional field.

Next, I think it would be highly valuable to dissect the nontraditional population between the different degrees of nontraditional status, minimally, moderately and highly nontraditional, and study the socialization processes within these different subgroups. When looking at the results of my study, it was apparent that not only were there discrepancies between nontraditional students and their traditional counterparts, but there were differences in the socialization processes between highly, moderately and minimally nontraditional students. Also, I discovered there was differences even in the basic idea of valuing higher education. Thus, it would be beneficial to the nontraditional student population to continue to explore and understand the discrepancies between the different degrees of nontraditional.

Student veterans made up a part of my sample but for the purpose of this study, my protocol examined their experiences at the undergraduate level and their plans post-graduation. There is much more substance to this demographic and as more student veterans decided to enroll in institutions of higher education, the more administration and faculty need to be educated on how to assist these students in achieving their academic and professional goals. Some areas of study pertaining to student veterans, as mentioned during the interview process, could be the challenges to transitioning from active duty to civilian life or the barriers of

communicating and interacting with other student veterans. Similar to the nontraditional student population as a whole, when I was searching for existing literature on student veterans, not many studies have approached this subject matter.

Finally, and this as a more general observation, the field of nontraditional students' needs to continue to be investigated at greater depths. When I was reviewing the already existing literature within the field, there is very little research done on this specific population. I can attest first-hand that it is a population that is difficult to commit to participate in a study since their time on campus is limited, but it is a growing population on college campuses that needs further attention. My study was the first in its kind to look at nontraditional students and how socialization processes influences post-graduate plans. As the trend of nontraditional students becomes more prevalent on college campuses, it will be of great importance to continue to learn and understand the phenomenon of this specific population. It also will be of great importance to continue to break down the nontraditional student profile, accept that not one student is the same as the next and continue to understand each student's unique situations... on and off college campuses.

## APPENDIX A

### KEY TERMS FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

**Table 3.** Key terms for nontraditional students

<b><u>KEY TERM</u></b>	<b><u>DEFINITION</u></b>
24 Years or Older	The student is 24-years of age or older when first enrolled at an institution
Delays Enrollment	Delays enrollment in some type of postsecondary education for at least one academic year after high school graduation
Part-time Student	Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
Works Full-time	Works 35 hour or more per week
Financially Independent	Is considered financially independent for the purposes of financial aid
Has Dependents	Has dependents other than a spouse (typically children)
Single Parent	Either not married or is married but separated and has children
Does not have a High School Diploma	Does not have a high school diploma but an equivalent such as a GED or another high school certificate

## APPENDIX B

### MAJORS, MINORS AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS OF GENERAL STUDIES



**Figure 5.** CGS's *Majors and Minors*



## APPENDIX C

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR DIRECTOR OF MCCARL CENTER

Dear (Name of Student),

I have been asked by Allison Saras, a PhD candidate in the School of Education, to send you an email asking for your participation in a 60-90 minute interview about your experiences at the University of Pittsburgh in the College of General Studies and your plans upon graduation. Your feedback is not only greatly appreciated by Allison, but it is important to the College of General Studies as we continue to improve the experience for all of our students.

All interviews will be held in the main conference room at the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success located on the ground floor of Posvar Hall. And of course, during a time that is most convenient for you the start of the spring semester in January. All information that you provide Allison will be kept confidential and she can ensure anonymity in terms of her data collection and reporting.

Allison is eager to start setting up interviews so if you have additional questions or are interested in participating in this study, please do one of the following:

- 1) Email me directly, [awr15@pitt.edu](mailto:awr15@pitt.edu) that you are interested in participating and Allison will contact you via email to set-up a time for your interview  
or
- 2) Email her directly at [saras@pitt.edu](mailto:saras@pitt.edu)  
or
- 3) Call her directly at 412-889-5368

I sincerely hope you will consider participating in this study and providing the College of General Studies important feedback to help improve the student experience. Please also feel free to let me know if you have other questions or concerns regarding Allison's study.

Best regards,

Director, McCarl Center for Nontraditional Students  
University of Pittsburgh  
College of General Studies

## APPENDIX D

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPT FOR OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS STAFF

Dear (Name of Student),

I have been asked by Allison Saras, a PhD candidate in the School of Education, to send you an email asking for your participation in a 60-90 minute interview about your experiences at the University of Pittsburgh in the College of General Studies and your plans upon graduation. Your feedback is not only greatly appreciated by Allison, but it is important to the College of General Studies as we continue to improve the experience for all of our students.

All interviews will be held in the main conference room at the McCarl Center for Nontraditional Student Success located on the ground floor of Posvar Hall. And of course, during a time that is most convenient for you the start of the spring semester in January. All information that you provide Allison will be kept confidential and she can ensure anonymity in terms of her data collection and reporting.

Allison is eager to start setting up interviews so if you have additional questions or are interested in participating in this study, please do one of the following:

- 1) Email me directly, [awr15@pitt.edu](mailto:awr15@pitt.edu) that you are interested in participating and Allison will contact you via email to set-up a time for your interview  
or
- 2) Email her directly at [saras@pitt.edu](mailto:saras@pitt.edu)  
or
- 3) Call her directly at 412-889-5368

I sincerely hope you will consider participating in this study and providing the College of General Studies important feedback to help improve the student experience. Please also feel free to let me know if you have other questions or concerns regarding Allison's study.

Best regards,

Veterans Benefits Coordinator  
University of Pittsburgh

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW INFORMATION SCRIPT

The purpose of this research study is to examine the nontraditional student undergraduate experience and the impact these experiences have on a student's professional and educational goals upon graduation. For that reason, I will be interviewing nontraditional college students at the University of Pittsburgh and asking them to participate in an in-person interview lasting no longer than 90-minutes. I may also contact the participant to clarify any unclear points discussed during the interview (or that I find when I transcribe the interview). All participants must be 18 years of age or older. If you are willing to participate, my interview questions will pertain to background (e.g., age, years of education, family background), as well as your feelings regarding your experience(s) (both academic and social) at the University of Pittsburgh.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you.

Your participation is voluntary and you will not receive any payment for participation. If for any reason during the interview you wish to stop, you may do so at that time.

For reporting purposes, only codes not actual names will be used to link answers to participants.

All responses are confidential, and results will be kept under lock and key or in password-protected files.

This study is being conducted by Allison Saras, PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh who can be reached via phone, 412-889-5368 or email, [saras@pitt.edu](mailto:saras@pitt.edu).

Thank you in advance for your participation.

## APPENDIX F

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*Allison Saras will begin the interview with asking the student's name, anticipated date of graduation and area of study at the University of Pittsburgh. Allison will also remind students that their names will be kept confidential during the analyzing and reporting process of her research.*

*Allison will then provide the participant with a list of Susan Choy's characteristics of a nontraditional student: 24-years of age or older, delays enrollment, enrolled part-time, works full-time, financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent or earned a GED or other high school completion certificate. After showing the participants, Allison will then set the paper aside to discuss during the end of the interview.*

**1. What has your experience been like at the University of Pittsburgh?**

➤ **Probing questions/phrases:**

- ✓ *Characteristics of nontraditional*
- ✓ *Degrees of nontraditional*



CONTEXT

➤ **How does the question relate to the literature?**

- ✓ *Choy (2002)*

➤ **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**

- ✓ *How does nontraditional students characterize themselves on campus?*

**2. What does your typical day look like at the University of Pittsburgh?**

➤ **Probing questions/phrases:**

- ✓ *How many hours are you spending on campus?*
- ✓ *Number of classes in a day*
- ✓ *Visiting other buildings on campus – gyms, libraries, eateries?*
- ✓ *Do you attend social activities on campus? Do you attend academic events on campus – lunch and learns? – additional lectures or speakers?*

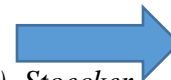


CONTEXT

- **How does the question relate to the literature?**
    - ✓ *Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto (1993)*
    - ✓ *The number of hours on campus correlates to a person's persistence and retention at an institution.*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *How does nontraditional students' integration (involvement) – both academically and socially, affect their undergraduate experience?*
3. **Can you tell me how you are involved both academically and socially on campus?**
- **Probing questions/phrases:**
    - ✓ *Relationships with faculty members?*
    - ✓ *Involvement in and out of the classroom?*
    - ✓ *Rapport with classmates in and out of the classroom*
    - ✓ *Feelings of positive integration or isolation on campus both academically and socially?*
    - ✓ *Familiarity with the campus, staff and faculty*
    - ✓ *Access to on and off-campus resources*
  - **How does the question relate to the literature?**
    - ✓ *Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto (1993), Weidman (1984, 1989, 2006)*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *How does nontraditional students' integration (involvement) – both academically and socially, affect their undergraduate experience?*
    - ✓ *How does a nontraditional student integrate both socially and academically internally and externally with peer groups and how does this impact their experience at the undergraduate level?*
    - ✓ *How does a nontraditional student relate and/or integrate with co-curriculum programs and similar majors on campus?*
4. **What are your plans after graduation?**
- **Probing questions/phrases:**
    - ✓ *Have you ever considered graduate school?*
    - ✓ *What are your attitudes graduate education?*
    - ✓ *Economic, social, status or occupation reasons*
    - ✓ *Would you want to pursue graduate education in the field that you are studying?*
  - **How does the question relate to the literature?**
    - ✓ *Kallio (1995), Mullen, Goyette and Soares (2003), Stoecker (1991), Stolzenberg, 1994*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *Why do nontraditional students pursue graduate study?*
    - ✓ *Why do nontraditional students not want to pursue graduate study?*
    - ✓ *What other alternative paths are nontraditional graduates considering after graduation?*



CONTEXT



CONTEXT

5. Can you talk a little bit about your relationships with your peers, institutional personnel (staff) and faculty and any specific experiences (good and bad) you've had with any of these populations?

➤ **Probing questions/phrases:**

- ✓ *Good relationships, bad relationships*
- ✓ *Relationships with classmates (nontraditional and traditional)*
- ✓ *Mentors*
- ✓ *A staff or faculty member that positively has influenced your experience? negatively influenced your experience?*
- ✓ *If you do not have any relationships why any staff or faculty members, explain.*



**RECONSTRUCT**

➤ **How does the question relate to the literature?**

- ✓ *Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto (1993), Weidman (1984, 1989)*

➤ **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**

- ✓ *How does nontraditional students' integration (involvement) – both academically and socially, affect their undergraduate experience?*
- ✓ *Reflection on the importance of staff/faculty relationships with students inside and outside of the classroom and how these relationships positively or negatively influence a student's academic integration at an institution.*

6. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

➤ **Probing questions/phrases:**

- ✓ *Female vs. male*
- ✓ *Race*
- ✓ *Are you a first-generation college student?*
- ✓ *Current and family socioeconomic status*



**RECONSTRUCT**

➤ **How does the question relate to the literature?**

- ✓ *Ethington & Smart (1986), Mullen, Goyette & Soares (2003), Tinto(1993), Weidman (1984, 1989)*

➤ **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**

- ✓ *How does a nontraditional student's individual attributes and family background influence their views on higher education?*

7. How well do you feel you are prepared to go onto graduate school?

➤ **Probing questions/phrases:**

- ✓ *Skills and abilities*
- ✓ *Where did those skills and abilities come from?*
- ✓ *Characteristics of the University of Pittsburgh (size, selectivity, public)*
- ✓ *Academic and social integration*
- ✓ *Achieving satisfactory grades*
- ✓ *Counseling?*
- ✓ *Career Office?*
- ✓ *Has the University of Pittsburgh prepared you for graduate study?*



**REFLECT**

➤ **How does the question relate to the literature?**

- ✓ *Ethington & Smart (1986)*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *How do nontraditional students perceive institutions as adequately preparing them for graduate study?*
8. **Let's go back to the list of characteristics and talk about each of them in relation to your experience at the University of Pittsburgh?**
- **Probing questions/phrases:**
    - ✓ *How does this speak to your experiences at Pitt?*
    - ✓ *How does this speak to your attitudes about graduate school?*
  - **How does the question relate to the literature?**
    - ✓ *Choy (2002), Ethington & Smart (1986)*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *How does a nontraditional student characterize themselves on campus?*
9. **What else would you like to add to our conversation about your experience both at the McCarl Center and the University of Pittsburgh as a whole?**
- **Probing questions/phrases:**
    - ✓ *Good experiences, bad experiences*
    - ✓ *Events or situations that stand out in your mind*
    - ✓ *Need for further study in the field*
  - **How does the question relate to the literature?**
    - ✓ *Choy (2002), Ethington & Smart (1986), Weidman (1984, 1989)*
  - **How does the question relate to my research question(s)?**
    - ✓ *What normative contexts (majors, peer groups, co-curriculum) do students describe as relevant to their socialization at the undergraduate-level and aspirations upon graduation?*



**REFLECT**



**REFLECT**

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