

Finding the path:
Enrolling in post-secondary studies
without a secondary school graduation diploma

by

Andrea J. Smith
BEd, University of Victoria, 2003

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

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For a distinct portion of Canadian youth, completing a high school diploma with their same-age peers is not a reality. Fortunately, opportunities exist for these individuals to later return to educational institutions to continue their formal education, thereby increasing their job prospects, wages, and quality of life. Barriers faced by these so-called “non-traditional” learners are examined through the data gathered from an anonymous survey and from focus group interviews with students who currently attend a college in western Canada. The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the experiences and beliefs of “non-traditional” students, including how they were able to enrol in post-secondary education without a high school diploma, what barriers they actually did, or continue to, face, and what strategies and supports have been, or would be, most helpful to them as they navigate the many challenges and transitions to find their path on their educational journey.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wonderful husband Jeremy who has given so much time, love, and wisdom to supporting me during my Masters studies, and who encouraged me to begin this journey in 2008. This is also dedicated to our 2-year-old son Ethan (who was born during my studies and has recently spent many afternoons patiently waiting for me to finish my writing so that I can join him in play), and to our 3-week old son Oliver who kindly seemed to wait for me to finish the bulk of my writing before joining our family. Thank you, each one of you – you mean the world to me.

Chapter 1

Bowlby (2005) writes that life experiences teach us that education improves one's lot in life. However, for many Canadian youth, the public high school educational system appears to them to fail to deliver on that promise of life improvement. The reasons that students choose not to complete a high school diploma are varied, and have been well researched by others (Tinto, 1998; De La Rosa, 2002; Kerrissey, 1989; Bridgeland, Delulio Jr., & Morison, 2006). Likewise, studies on the reasons why such students decide to return to school at a later age have also been well researched (Keene, 2003; Sloan, 2008; Whittick, 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). As a result, these two substantive and related topics will not be covered in this research project.

Instead, the purpose of this study is to explore the barriers and supports (especially at the institutional level) experienced by students who enrolled in post-secondary education, despite being classified as “drop-outs” and “non-traditional learners.” But who are the flesh and blood people that these labels actually refer to? This chapter will first define some of the key terms. “Drop-out” rates and post-secondary attendance rates in Canada will also be discussed, followed by job prospects and income expectations for high school non-completers, according to national research studies. Finally, statistical data supporting the value of higher education and the subsequent enrolment figures for Canada’s high school drop-outs will be highlighted to complete the overall picture of the numbers and the need for higher education support for this demographic of Canadians, suggesting that this phenomenon requires attention and intervention.

Definition of Terms

Who is classified as a “drop-out” or a “non-traditional student”? For the purposes of this research paper, a “drop-out” is considered to be “the share of 20-24 year olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school” (Bowlby, 2005, p. 3). Including individuals below this age range could be in error, as some youth may return to their formal schooling after stopping out, rather than dropping out (Gilmore, 2010). However, by age 24 research shows that students “typically have decided to return to complete their high school education or not” (Gilmore, 2010, p. 2).

If a so-called drop-out decides to access formal education at a later age, they are generally referred to as a non-traditional learner. Data gathered by the National Centre for Education Statistics in the United States in 2002 classify a non-traditional learner as a student who meets one or more of the following characteristics:

- delayed post-secondary enrolment for one year or more after high school graduation
- part-time enrolment
- full-time employment
- financial independence from parents
- presence of dependents, other than a spouse
- single parent or family responsibilities
- academic deficiencies, including no high school diploma

(Hardin 2008; Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006; Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz & Hoops, 2007; Ritt, 2008).

In light of the above criteria for non-traditional students, it is clear that an “adult learner” can be defined by similar terms (Hardin, 2008). Indeed, adult education models are often synonymous with non-traditional learners' needs, and refer to “a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values or skills” (Darkenwald & Merriam, quoted in Cupp, 1991, p. 3). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, “non-traditional learner” and “adult learner” shall be considered synonymous.

Background Information

In Canada, studies have been completed that examine the numbers of youth who opt to drop out of high school, and the repercussions of these choices. According to Canada’s 2007 Youth in Transition Survey, our nation’s average high school drop-out rate in 2003 was 7.4% and rates varied according to family income, gender, and rural versus urban neighbourhoods (Gilmore, 2010; Zeman, 2007; Bowlby, 2005). Similarly, study results indicate that there is also a gap in academic preparedness skills across socio-economic backgrounds and between genders (Finnie, Mueller, Sweetman & Usher, 2010) suggesting that in addition to difficulty with high school completion, some students lack the pre-conditions necessary to attend post-secondary education, despite their possible desire or need to attend (Finnie et al., 2010).

Recent Labour Force Survey data from 2010 show that the high school drop-out rate for 20-24 year old Canadians had increased to 8.5% (6.2% in British Columbia) (Gilmore, 2010) and similar research on United States trends suggests that the number of high school non-graduates will continue to rise in many regions (Compton, et al., 2006).

On a global scale, a study on drop-out rate data for 25 countries completed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development showed that in 2002, Canada was in the middle of the ratings with a drop-out rate of 10.9%, slightly less than the 12.3% drop-out rate in the United States (Bowlby, 2005).

For those that do not complete high school, finding employment can be a life-long challenge. Research and statistics show that although drop-outs appear to be active in the job hunt market, they have difficulty landing a job (Gilmore, 2010) as the demand for such workers by employers is weak. In 2004, unemployment rates for Canadians ages 25-44 without a high school diploma were 12.2%, nearly twice the rate of Canadians in the same age group who had completed high school (6.8%) and substantially higher than individuals in this age group who had obtained post-secondary certification. When the age range is confined to citizens 20-24 years of age, the unemployment rate rockets to 19.4%, again double that of the unemployment rate for all Canadians of that same age in 2005 (Bowlby, 2005).

In 2008, before the recent economic downturn, the unemployment rate for high school drop-outs ages 20-24 had climbed to 18.0%. Data collected in 2009 at the deepest part of the economic downturn for the same age group showed an unemployment rate at 21.3%. And in 2010, although the nation began to recover, the unemployment rate for this group of Canadians had climbed higher to 23.2%, meaning that nearly one in four high school drop-outs were unemployed. This is a startling number, especially when one compares it to Canadians of the same age who completed high school – their rate of unemployment in 2010 was found to be less than half of this value at 11.9%, as shown in Figure 1 (Gilmore, 2010).

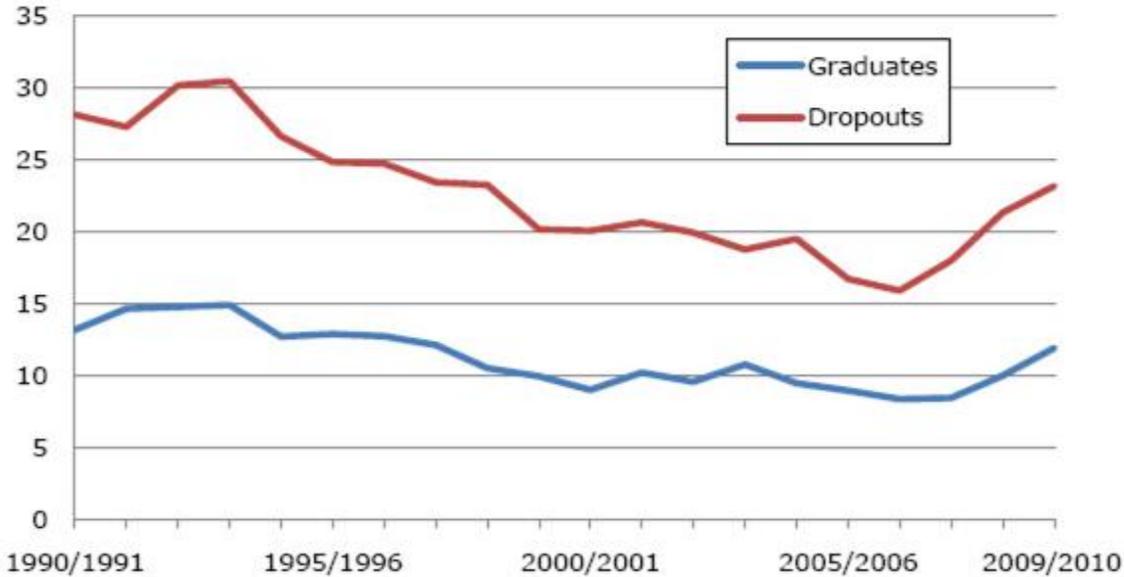


Figure 1. Unemployment rates as a percentage for high school graduates (lower line) and drop-outs (upper line) aged 20 to 24, 1990/1991 to 2009/2010.

The industrial economy of the early 1900s that called for unskilled labour is changing rapidly in modern times, and labour market data from the United States indicate that today's adults need higher levels of academic and technical knowledge to remain employable. Our current economy is growing in information and service-based positions and will require frequent job and career changes. The result of this is that the norm of the 'lifetime career' is gone, and workers must continually learn new skills and adapt to new job roles (Kazis et al., 2007).

According to the United States Bureau of Labour Statistics, 15 of the top 20 occupations to grow the fastest in this decade, with resulting new and vacant positions, all require some form of post-secondary education. In sharp contrast, the top 20 jobs expected to suffer the greatest decline in openings by 2014 only require on-the-job training (Kazis et al., 2007) and similar trends are predicted for Canada (Frey, 2007). This leaves those without an adequate level of education at a distinct disadvantage in the

job market.

Indeed, the North American economy is calling for a more technologically sophisticated skill set, meaning that many adults who struggle to qualify for work now will continue to lack the appropriate skills to be competitive (Compton et al., 2007). Market trends indicate that outsourcing and layoffs will result in more adults looking for work (Kazis et al., 2007) and employers want workers with the ability to be resilient, to think critically, and to solve problems. Additionally, workers need to have skills including effective communication, the ability to manage technology, and the ability to adapt to changes in the workplace (Ritt, 2008). Thus “the ability to access education and training is critical to current and future generations of adult workers seeking a higher wage and a better quality of life” (Kazis et al., 2007, p. 4), and for those who have not obtained a high school diploma, access to post-secondary education options is of vital importance (Kazis et al., 2007).

Not finishing high school also goes beyond the labour market impact for many individuals, who not only struggle to find work, but who also may end up with lower job quality and decreased financial benefits compared to same-age peers who achieved a high school diploma (Gilmore, 2010). High school drop-outs are less likely to have union coverage through their workplace, and in 2009/2010, only 14.4% of employed drop-outs were covered by a collective agreement at work (compared to 20.4% of high school graduates) (Gilmore, 2010).

Wage disparities are also common: data from 2010 indicate that the median weekly earnings of full-time employed drop-outs were \$480, compared to \$577 earned by high school graduates (Gilmore, 2010). This translates to a difference of over \$5000 per

year in favour of those who complete high school.

Similar results can be seen in research from the United States with regard to higher education as compared to the completion of high school. In 2003 the median annual salary for those with only a high school diploma was \$30,800, compared to \$37,600 for individuals with an associate's degree, and \$49,900 for individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher (Ritt, 2008; Kazis et al., 2007). In 1975, an individual with a bachelor's degree could expect to earn 1.5 times the salary of someone with only a high school diploma. By 1999, that ratio had increased to 1.8 (Kazis et al., 2007).

Research by Snyder (in Ritt, 2008) suggests that a US citizen with a bachelor's degree will earn a lifetime average of \$2.1 million which is nearly two times more than a worker with only a high school diploma. Similar results from studies in the United Kingdom in 2005 indicate that the "graduate premium" or the extra amount earned in a lifetime by an individual who attended post-secondary education compared with someone of the same age who did not attend post-secondary education was calculated at £400,000 or approximately \$900,000 in Canadian funds (Simpson, 2005).

Research by Bowlby (2005) indicates that "a large and continually growing body of evidence exists that suggests the more education, the better, especially when it comes to making a smooth transition into the workforce. A high school diploma is very important. Not only can it provide entry to post-secondary education, it sends a strong signal to prospective employers" (Bowlby, 2005, p. 1). This is echoed by Brock (2010), who asserts that "fewer decisions matter more to a young person's future than the decision to attend college and earn a degree" (Brock, 2010, p. 110).

Significance of the Study

Besides the substantial increase in income, completing high school and even earning a post-secondary diploma or degree can include other benefits. Brock (2010) cites research that suggests that those who attend college or earn a bachelor degree indicate better health than individuals with only a high school diploma. Thus a college education can arguably contribute to the overall well-being of the individual, communities, and society at large (Ritt, 2008).

According to British Columbia's Ministry of Advanced Education, "BC's ability to compete and succeed in the global knowledge economy is dependent upon the ability to create a highly skilled, flexible and adaptable workforce. BC faces a growing demand for skilled workers at a time when the province is grappling with the twin challenges of an ageing population and skill shortages in high-skilled occupations and high-growth industries" (2010/2011 Annual Service Plan Report, p. 13). This same document asserts that there are over 1,000,000 people in British Columbia "whose literacy or essential skills are below the level needed to enable them to fully participate in education and training, significantly limiting their options for participating in the labour force" (2010/2011 Annual Service Plan Report, p. 13).

Studies predict an estimated shortage of 1.2 million workers in Canada by 2025 due to an ageing population, future retirements in the baby boomer generation, and a decline in the number of youth entering the labour market (Kirby, Curran, & Hollett, 2009). The United States faces a similar situation, with an estimated shortage at over nine million qualified workers by 2014 (Kazis et al., 2007).

To remain globally competitive, Canada needs to invest in upgrading the skills of

the current workforce and increase participation of those not yet involved in the labour market to avoid future labour and skills shortages and to meet the needs of the rapidly changing global knowledge-based economy. Additionally, “it is also suggested that the maintenance of our standard of living, quality of life and the very survival of our society and culture is predicated on the nations' capacity to foster a 'culture of learning' whereby Canadians participate in learning throughout life” (Kirby et al., 2009).

Rationale

In the era of global economic competition, Canada has a greater need for an educated workforce. Kirby et al. (2009) assert that “in Canadian public discourse, participation in learning throughout one's life has been described as both a functional necessity and an economic imperative” (p. 65).

Research clearly shows that citizens need a college degree to compete, not only for the purposes of finding a job, but in order to support a family (Brock, 2010). Ritt (2008) claims that “a college degree is no longer a luxury but rather a necessity” (p. 15). The 21st century workforce demands that individuals be educated to be flexible and to adapt to the changing times (Ritt, 2008).

The data presented thus far indicate that “a college degree provides adults with significant lifelong opportunities for personal and professional development” (Ritt, 2008, p. 15) including economic advantage, increased health, social mobility, opportunities for self-improvement, and professional growth (Ritt, 2008). For those without a high school diploma, the challenges faced in the labour market are well documented and show clearly that there is a need for higher education. Many citizens need the opportunity to pursue their post-secondary education in Canada.

Given the reported numbers of Canadians who do not complete high school and the obvious need for this level of education and beyond with regard to multiple employment-based benefits, there is a clear need to provide opportunities for citizens to pursue higher education. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on improving access to training and educational opportunities for non-traditional students in Canada (Kirby et al., 2009) so that they can complete to compete, and compete to benefit.

Purpose of the Study and Research Design

In consideration of the need for citizens to obtain secondary and post-secondary education, this research paper endeavours to illuminate the experiences of non-traditional students who enrol in post-secondary education. However, despite the knowledge that exists about how those who did not complete high school can return to formal education, and the theories and policies that discuss their return, there is a dearth of recent research which has investigated the students' beliefs and experiences.

This topic is of great interest to me both as a researcher and as a teacher in British Columbia's public school system. My current position in a local high school involves working with students with various learning challenges, from designated learning disabilities, to intense behaviour designations, to challenging home and community situations. Some of these students choose to remove themselves from the school system, and I often hear them talk about their fear of the future and the options available to them without a high school diploma. Thus I am interested in exploring the real-life experiences of individuals who have not achieved a high school diploma with their same-age peers, but who have accessed post-secondary education. It is my hope that by exploring the experiences of these students that I might gain a broader perspective of the

challenges and supports for “drop-outs” who elect to enrol in post-secondary education, and that the knowledge that I gain will benefit future high school students who need to know about these options and realities.

Therefore this thesis will explore the beliefs and experiences of students that did not obtain a high school diploma with their same age peers, but who currently attend a community college in western Canada. Data will be gathered from voluntary participants by way of an anonymous survey and a focus group interview session. The over-arching purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the experiences of non-traditional students in post-secondary education, including how they were able to return, what barriers they actually did, or continue to, face (especially at the institutional level), and what strategies and supports have been, or would be, most helpful to them as they navigate many challenges and transitions to find their path on their educational journey.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the background information underlying this thesis, the rationale for the research, and its significance, not only to individuals, but to the larger Canadian society. The next chapter will review the research findings from current literature with regard to barriers faced by non-traditional and adult learners and their experiences with post-secondary education.

Chapter 2

Research and statistics noted in the previous chapter make a clear argument that the population of students in Canada who have not received adequate educational training (such as not completing a high school diploma) is indeed noteworthy. Moreover, the data regarding labour market trends and long-term benefits to individuals, communities, and families, make the need for higher education options for this demographic clear.

Research and literature on this topic suggests that many barriers exist for non-traditional students and that building an awareness of the needs of non-traditional learners will increase their opportunities for enrolment and success in post-secondary education programs.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to review the current literature as to the issues pertaining to the post-secondary education participation of non-traditional learners, including the barriers faced by non-traditional learners, key characteristics of adult learning theory, and the subsequent learning environment conditions that are likely to foster educational success for this demographic.

Barriers

As discussed in the previous chapter, a non-traditional learner is an individual who exhibits certain characteristics, including (among others) academic deficiencies (including no high school diploma), delayed post-secondary education enrolment, full-time employment, family responsibilities including children, and financial independence from parents (Hardin 2008, Compton et al., 2006, Kazis et al., 2007, Ritt 2008).

Unfortunately, these characteristics place non-traditional learners at greater risk for not

completing post-secondary education programs, and research suggests that adult learners are also at greater risk for not achieving post-secondary education goals due to the fact that they meet many characteristics of non-traditional learners (Kazis et al., 2007).

According to the Canadian Council on Learning, citizens with the most to gain from higher education seem to be the least likely to obtain it (cited in Kirby et al., 2009). Research by Rubenson, Desjardins and Yoon (2007) suggests that “the highest participation rates in adult education and training are found among the employed (vs. the unemployed), the highly educated (versus the less educated), and the highly skilled (vs. the lower skilled)” (quoted in Kirby et al., 2007, p. 66). In addition, Kirby et al. (2007) argue that “those individuals with lower levels of formal education stand to benefit the most from training opportunities... [yet] low-income learners, people with disabilities, and individuals who leave school early face multiple barriers to participating in education and training as adults” (p. 66). According to research by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, barriers faced by students can be classified into four categories: psychological barriers, educational barriers, situational barriers, and institutional barriers (Hardin, 2008).

Psychological barriers.

Returning to school is a major life change for most adults, and with it comes the stress of applying, enrolling, attending classes, and trying to create new identities in all areas of their lives (Hardin, 2008). A study of adult-aged college students in 1991 by Cupp revealed that many students reported that their relationships were affected as a result of their return to education, and that it was difficult to devote time to these relationships despite the desire to spend more time with family and children (also in

Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1997). Indeed, adult students often juggle parenting, employment, and school responsibilities (Hardin, 2008). In a 1997 study by Blaxter et al. that included interviews with post-secondary students, respondents' answers indicated that some students were able to manage the 'triple shift' of balancing family, work and education. However, most adults feel disoriented with these transitions and the continued stress that they bring (Hardin, 2008).

Rogers (2002) suggests that another major problem facing adult and non-traditional learners is anxiety, specifically concerning the subject matter, the evaluation process of the course, or simply with regard to one's personal abilities. In addition, a learner's progress may be seriously affected by inadequate coping skills, a lack of self confidence, poor self image, negative beliefs or expectations about outcomes, and anxiety about schooling based on prior experiences (Hardin, 2008; Cupp, 1991). Indeed, adult learners have often experienced negative educational events in their past and thus approach learning with low self esteem (McGrath, 2009; Ritt, 2008).

For many adults, concerns also arise with regard to coping, self confidence, ageing, physical exhaustion, and decreases in memory and concentration. Anxiety can result from the challenge of unlearning old ways, which can be a difficult but necessary part of the adult education experience. Adult learners may not be ready to have their beliefs challenged and may feel threatened or isolated by the topics and teaching methods used at post-secondary institutions. For example, adults may feel at a loss during a group discussion if they do not have the same life experiences as the other students (McGrath, 2009), but at the same time they may need an increase in recognition for their own

repertoire of life experiences (Cupp, 1991). Regardless of the source of anxiety, mental withdrawal can result, which hampers learning and retention (Rogers, 2002).

Interestingly, research by Cross (cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1991) suggests that adult learners may underestimate their predispositional barriers upon their return to school, and thus may state that cost is a major barrier for them when in fact it may be their own disinterest, lack of skills, or lack of confidence that are hampering their progress. Unfortunately, Askham's 2008 study on adult students in post-secondary institutions indicate that these learners are often reluctant to seek help (educational or psychological) due to a high degree of acceptance of life's difficulties, and that seeking help can be associated with failure or loss of face.

Educational barriers.

Students who wish to access post-secondary education but who have not completed a high school diploma face barriers regarding academic eligibility. Research discussed by Kazis et al. (2007), Finnie et al. (2010), and Ritt (2008) indicates that gaps in learning between high school and college, as well as weak academic skills, are noted barriers to success for non-traditional learners in post-secondary education.

Finnie et al. (2010) argue that results from their research suggest that the cost of post-secondary education is actually of secondary importance – the ability for an individual to apply and attend a post-secondary institution is the first barrier that hopeful students face. Their research shows that many students in high school lack the pre-conditions of academic preparedness necessary to attend post-secondary institutions, including missing credits, lack of a high school completion diploma, and other so-called 'poor choices' that encompass decisions that adversely affect one's academic future.

Situational barriers.

Situational barriers consistently faced by non-traditional learners as noted in current research include lack of time, cost of courses, family commitments (Kazis et al., 2007; Frey, 2007), personal and family schedules, child care challenges, financial limitations, and employment scheduling (Ritt, 2008; Kirby et al., 2009; McGrath, 2009). These results are supported quantitatively by Canada's 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey of participants and non-participants in higher education, which reports that 45% of non-participants indicated cost as their primary reason for not attending post-secondary institutions. Other issues frequently identified were being too busy at work (35%), family responsibilities (27%), and conflicting schedules (27%) (cited in Kirby et al., 2009). Additionally, a study of adult-aged college students in 1991 by Cupp revealed that other common barriers were transportation and commuting, no place to study, giving up hobbies, and having to decrease participation in extra curricular activities due to lack of time.

Cost is indeed a pressing issue for most adult and non-traditional students, and research by Finnie et al. (2010) suggests that in the last 40 years, students' reliance on part-time work and student financial assistance (such as loans) has increased, whereas external supports for financing post-secondary education have declined sharply (including parental support, bursaries, and government funding). An increase in student borrowing means a greater debt load for those struggling with the costs associated with post-secondary attendance. For example, data collected by Canada's Youth in Transition Survey in 2003 regarding average undergraduate fees reported British Columbia as the sixth most expensive province in Canada with an average annual tuition cost of \$4,140.

(Nova Scotia had the highest annual average, with tuition costs at \$5,557 and Quebec was lowest with \$1,862) (cited in Zeman, 2007).

These barriers do not go unnoticed by institutional members, as revealed in a study of Canadian institutions by Kirby et al. (2009). When asked what the major barriers were for non-traditional students, institutions indicated that cost and time were of utmost importance to their students. Unfortunately, as noted by one institutional respondent, the difficulty with paying for post-secondary education is most often experienced by those who need the education the most: “a less educated adult who is trying to upgrade their skills may be in a lower paid job or have lower income to start with. So it is the ones who most need the training, the less educated adult, [who] are the ones who are going to have the least financial capacity to pay for it themselves” (as quoted in Kirby et al., 2009, p. 77).

A United Kingdom report echoes these findings and suggests that the biggest cost to full time students is the loss of earnings during study (Simpson, 2005), as many adults and non-traditional learners face the reality of losing a job or trying to manage with a reduced income (Hardin, 2008) while attending post-secondary education. Most students are 'employees who study' rather than 'students who work' (Kazis et al., 2007) and this has great implications for the barriers and challenges faced by non-traditional learners including competing responsibilities for time, energy and financial resources. The vast majority of adult learners must continually juggle work schedules (part time or full time), family responsibilities including dependents, and the challenges that come with financial independence (Kazis et al., 2007).

Choy's study (cited in Kazis et al., 2007) of correlations between student grades and employment found that for approximately 40% of students, work negatively affected their grades and caused difficulty with regard to registering for classes. Additional studies suggest that many adult and non-traditional students face employment challenges including no time for scheduled classes or study time, no support from one's employer, and no incentive for completion (Ritt 2008; Hardin, 2008; Kirby et al., 2009).

Institutional barriers.

Research completed by Kazis et al. (2007) suggests that traditional higher education programs and policies were created when 18-22 year old full-time dependent students right out of high school were the core market. However, the demographics of most institutions have changed, and the older model is not well designed for adult learners. Additionally, institutions are frequently more geared to a younger crowd which can play a part in adults having more trouble staying in school (Kazis et al., 2007). Frey (2007) suggests that the needs and priorities of adult learners differ from those of traditional learners, and this makes it difficult for adults to enter and succeed in traditional environments. Cupp (1991) also noted that a lack of knowledge of how to navigate the post-secondary education system is a barrier for adult-aged college students.

Additionally, adults and non-traditional learners often face barriers with regard to course scheduling and location challenges, including courses and programs not available when needed or offered at inconvenient times, a lack of course offerings in the evenings or on weekends or during the summer, and difficult-to-access locations for courses (Kazis et al., 2007; Hardin, 2008; Frey, 2007; Cupp, 1991; Ritt, 2008). Other challenges consistently noted in current research include inflexible course scheduling, long course

and program durations, and inflexible entry, exit and re-entry processes (Kazis et al., 2007). As Kazis et al. (2007) suggest, any program aspect that impairs the quickest route for an adult or non-traditional learner to achieve their goals can be a barrier.

Indeed, program structure and requirements may result in decreased access for adult learners which makes persistence difficult (Kazis et al., 2007). For example, research by McCabe (cited in Kazis et al., 2007) suggests that 40% of college students are required to enrol in at least one basic skills class due to weak pre-college skills. However, this requirement can be a barrier if such a course option does not exist at an institution, and although basic education courses are often meant to be seen as a door of opportunity for an adult to upgrade their skills, they may in fact be viewed as a wall for non-traditional learners who want to start their program and may be frustrated by the need to upgrade first. According to research by Kazis and Liebowitz (cited in Kazis et al., 2007), fewer than half of the adult learners in American developmental education courses complete their upgrading courses and move on to their desired program.

Other institutional barriers include institutional policies and procedures, a perceived lack of institutional commitment to adult and non-traditional learners, the lack of extended faculty hours, the absence of accurate academic advisement to create long term goals and clarify student pathways, and quality instruction (Cupp, 1991; Hardin, 2008; Ritt, 2008). Additionally, teaching methods and supports that don't meet learners' needs may result in students feeling frustrated and disconnected. For example, some students may feel demeaned by traditional teaching methods (such as pedagogical models) that infantize them, or when instructors don't acknowledge the experiences and knowledge that their adult learners bring to the classroom. Some teaching styles may

also replicate the same methods that did not work for adult learners in high school (Kazis et al., 2007).

Another barrier, as noted previously, is that of cost. However, in this instance, this barrier refers to the implications of cost upon institutions. The limiting of operational funding by governing bodies has an influence over the nature and scope of the offerings at institutions, which may result in programs being offered that don't necessarily target the needs of non-traditional students. (Kirby et al., 2009). In addition, institutions have commented on the difficulties faced in trying to schedule courses to meet the varying needs of non-traditional learners while battling space limitations, as formal education programs often claim priority (Kirby, et al., 2009; Ritt, 2008).

Adult Learning Theory

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) assert that “the more we know about adult learners, the changes they go through, and how these changes motivate and interact with learning, the better we can structure learning experiences that both respond to and stimulate development” (p. 119). For example, just as child development drives pedagogical theories, knowledge of adult development is key in the understanding of adult learning theories, and although there are similarities between how children and adults learn, adult learners have different needs (McGrath, 2009; Hardin, 2008).

Perhaps the most prominent difference between the two groups is that of developmental characteristics. For adults, this means ageing. The effects of ageing are often of great concern to adult learners, and may include physical, cognitive, and psychological factors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

For example, adults tend to derive self-identity from their life experiences, defining who they are in terms of their accumulation of these experiences, and as a result have a deep investment in their value (Knowles, cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Additionally, adult learners seek education that fits into their lives, rather than the other way around, and often may see themselves as workers more than students. In fact, an adult learner's role as a student is likely to have less priority than that of being a spouse, a parent, or a worker (Compton et al., 2006). As a result, adults with life experiences and multiple roles may struggle with the impact of these experiences on their new role as a student. In addition, past experiences can be an obstacle with regard to addressing negative attitudes towards learning, letting go of old methods, and learning new strategies as necessary (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Definition of andragogy.

Malcolm Knowles, founder of the term 'andragogy,' defines it as “the art and science of helping adults to learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Simply, andragogy involves knowing how adults learn and how to involve them in the process (Henschke cited in McGrath, 2009). The theory of andragogy further states that the lecturer or teacher does not know everything and thus students are encouraged to participate by instilling their own experiences and making connections (Henschke cited in McGrath, 2009). The lecturer is seen as a facilitator and guide whose job it is to relate the course topics to students' lives and the world of work.

Addressing adult learner needs.

Adult students bring unique learning interests, educational goals, and instructional needs to the classroom (Miglietti & Strange, 1998). For example, adults need to have an awareness of why they are learning something, as they have a readiness to learn and tend to take responsibility for their own learning (McGrath, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Hardin, 2008). For adults, time is important, and such an investment can hold as much importance as that of money or effort (Kidd, 1973). Thus it is important to remember that adult learners are re-creating themselves and will need guidance in interacting with the new context and with their new identity of themselves as a student in a post-secondary environment (Rogers, 2002).

Therefore, in addition to knowledge of adult learning theory and the principles proposed by andragogy, Knowles (1980) writes that adult educators should strive to support adult learners in the following ways: help learners diagnose their needs in a given situation; create conditions to cause the learner to want to learn; plan a sequence of experiences to help adult students reach a desired learning goal; select the most effective methods to reach these goals; provide human and material resources; and help learners to measure outcomes and re-diagnose learning needs.

Teaching style is also important with adult learners at their various stages (McGrath, 2009), and research by Conti (1985) on teacher and student interactions suggests that “a relationship exists between the teaching style used in the adult education setting and student achievement” (p. 227). Additionally, educators should keep in mind that there are many needs in any adult learner group and this will constantly change (Rogers, 2002).

One method for facilitating learner engagement and connection is for instructors to use group work activities, as adult learners are problem-centred and do well in situations where the task is to work through a problem (McGrath, 2009). Conti (1985) echoes this, suggesting that a “significantly large portion of literature” (p. 221) supports collaborative learning styles for adults (also in Fenwick, 2001).

In accordance with adult learning theory, other methods found to be effective when working with adults include incorporating past experiences (Rogers, 2002), connecting these experiences to learning episodes (Kidd cited in Conti, 1985), and encouraging students to rely less on memory and rote learning due to the fact that in the process of ageing the ability to remember and to concentrate decreases (Rogers, 2002). Additionally, curriculum should be learner-centred and cooperative (Kidd cited in Conti, 1985).

Emphasis should be placed on the role of experiences, which are characteristic of adulthood. Instructors should help students relate their experiences to their new learning and to other life events. Indeed, interest increases when adults work with problems that concern them directly, and those that have immediate application. Adult learners need to participate in their learning in order to facilitate intellectual curiosity, openness, and to foster a degree of self-direction (Conti, 1985; Rogers, 2002) in which a teacher is more of a facilitator than a repository of facts (Kidd cited in Conti, 1985).

As adults are self-directed and problem-centred, they should take part in setting their goals and in the evaluation of their outcomes (Conti, 1985). Fenwick (2001) calls for a flexible process-oriented approach to evaluation for adult learners, including a

system that offers self-assessment, is on-going and developmental, and is process-oriented, holistic, and authentic.

Some adults will need help with developing critical thinking skills, and they may be self-consciously aware of their learning styles, and perhaps their academic inadequacies (Rogers, 2002). Adults have often spent some time away from the classroom setting and will therefore need more supports in order to find success (Kazis et al., 2007), such as additional practice due to the reality of not retaining information as quickly as younger students (Rogers, 2002). As knowledge is created, rather than just transferred, instructors need to teach students how to learn and to build an awareness that learning involves the whole person (Rogers, 2002). Therefore curriculum and teaching methods need to be built around the needs and interests of adult learners in order to help him or her in 'being' and 'becoming' (Kidd cited in Conti, 1985).

Learning Environment Conditions

Kazis et al. (2007) cite American statistics that show that three years after enrolling in college, almost half of non-traditional students had left school without a degree, compared with only one fifth of traditional students. Perhaps this is due, in part, to a “misperception that adult learners are self supporting and do not need the same level of support as 18-23 year old students. In reality, adult learners need at least as much assistance as traditional-aged students, and sometimes more” (Hardin, 2008, p. 53). The following sections summarize findings presented in the current literature that suggest ways to overcome barriers faced by adult and non-traditional learners with the goal of developing a learning environment conducive to the needs of non-traditional learners.

Regarding psychological barriers.

Research by Hardin (2008) suggests that adult students in higher education are likely to be at risk for psychological distress, as it can be traumatic for adults to be novices in the classroom after being successful in their occupations. As a result, adult and non-traditional learners can become isolated from the college learning community. Research results, according to the National On Campus Reports, have found that those involved in campus life are more likely to persist (cited in Hardin, 2008 and in Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). The challenge with integration is that adult students often lack the social network of traditional students, and therefore need greater outreach and facilitation to access the educational system (Cupp, 1991). Thus personnel must be creative in prompting adult and non-traditional learners to be involved (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011) and encourage interaction with others with similar interests and who are also managing multiple roles (Hardin, 2008).

Additionally, adults often see their support and social networks as lying outside of the institution, and thus they are not usually interested in 'college life' activities. The importance of friends and family as a support network is vital to the adult learner as Askham's study suggests, and adult learners are more likely to trust in and to seek help from their personal network rather than from the 'alien culture' of the college. Over the long term these close contacts become like stakeholders in the student's education, thereby increasing pressure for the adult not to fail (Askham, 2008).

Simpson (2005) suggests that strategies to support adult and non-traditional learners need to be proactive rather than merely reactive. This has more to do with effective student support as opposed to focusing solely on improvements in teaching.

The importance of student support cannot be underestimated, and Anderson (2003) suggests that “students who need help the most are the least likely to seek it” (quoted in Simpson, 2005, p. 42). It is no surprise, then, that Hardin (2008) recommends that all students need services to smoothen personal transitions, as well as time and opportunity to focus on their role as a student. Indeed, non-academic advice and assistance is also important, including information regarding finding good childcare, academic tutoring, financial aid advising, personal counselling (both on campus and off, and from paid staff and peers), and quality career counselling (Kazis et al., 2007). Therefore, the creation of a directory of resources (both on campus and off) is beneficial for adult students (Hardin, 2008) in addition to the use of counselling centres for emotional, physical, cultural, vocational, and relational transitions as a way to help students manage stress (Compton et al., 2006).

Indeed, Askham's 2008 study on adult learners suggests that adults' emotional history attached to learning is often overlooked, although it plays a role in the higher education experience. For example, the influences of aspirations, motivation, engagement, study habits, high school outcomes, and abilities of adult learners develop over many years, and may be difficult to identify and overcome for the individual learner without support (Finnie et al., 2010). In addition, many of the people at a post-secondary institution (including faculty and traditional-aged students) are familiar with the culture, norms and language of higher education, and it is often the case that adult learners and non-traditional students are left to interpret these characteristics through their own experiences and biographies, which can be a challenge for them (Askham, 2008). Therefore institutions need to provide specific tools to help adult students integrate with

the post-secondary environment and increase their chances for success (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Additionally, learning is facilitated for adult and non-traditional students when the classroom is built as a safe environment in which to test new behaviours and strategies, and one where the fear of failure is decreased. This last characteristic is important, as adult learners will defend their 'self' against threats perceived in the learning activities until they feel comfortable and realize that a change can lead to positive results (MacKeracher, 1996). Interestingly, in a study completed by Miglietti and Strange (1998) that involved interviewing adult and traditional-aged students, researchers found that adult students were more likely to report an increased sense of accomplishment in their classes than their traditional-aged counterparts if the environment was conducive to their social and emotional needs.

Regarding educational barriers.

Educational barriers, such as lacking appropriate prerequisites or a lack of a high school diploma, can be a challenge for many adult and non-traditional learners. Hardin (2008) cautions that some adults have been away from formal academics and may not have used classroom skills in a long while. As a result, such learners will need more supports to assist them in their transition into a learning environment, including a focus on study skills (Finnie et al., 2010). These students will need more attention and interaction, especially at the start of their program, which is why a lecture format often does not work for these learners (Twigg, 2004).

Programs such as the Adult Basic Education certificate in Canada or the GED in the United States typically measure one's ability to complete basic high school courses,

but do not measure one's ability to be successful in college, and thus may give a student a false impression of their likelihood of success at the college level (Hardin, 2008).

Additionally, adult learners may have developed learning strategies for work-related situations, and these strategies may not be as effective in academics, which may result in the adult becoming frustrated and losing confidence when they re-enter a classroom learning environment. Therefore post-secondary staff must frame formal education learning strategies in useful ways and allow students to practice them through repetition and variety. Kenner and Weinerman's 2011 paper concludes that students will replicate strategies in academics if they understand the benefits of the new strategies and their applications.

Regarding situational barriers.

Situational barriers, including lack of time, cost of education, and other life challenges, prove that there is a huge need for an increase in support for non-traditional learners (Kirby et al., 2009). Researchers argue that effective life-long learning should accommodate learners' work schedules and family needs, and allow for time off for study (Schuetze cited in Kirby et al., 2009). Programs should include support for costs and offer greater incentives for those who complete the course work such as financial incentives (for example tax incentives) to increase enrolment and completion (Kirby et al., 2009), and workshops and information sessions to ease the complications of applications to financial aid (Ritt, 2008).

Additionally, institutional staff need to be aware that an adult student's spotty attendance may be due to a whole host of factors, including a sick child or an inflexible work schedule (Cupp, 1991), and that these commitments may affect the time that an

adult student has to devote to lessons or activities. Although addressing the barrier of time is more grounded in an individual's situation, Cupp (1991) asserts that “if transforming newly realized interests or enlightened new perspectives into thoughtful action is a priority of education, and if students do not have the time to pursue both education and that which it stimulates, we must question whether we are defeating part of our educational mission” (p. 20).

Regarding institutional barriers.

Institutional barriers, including course offerings, scheduling, and program style, play an important role in the higher education experiences of adults and non-traditional learners. And, as made evident in Chapter 1 with regard to the future work force necessities in Canada, colleges and universities are faced with the need to expand their role to respond effectively to the needs of adult learners (Kirby et al., 2009). For example, post-secondary institutions must develop a broader perspective to consider the aspirations, motivation, engagement, study habits, high school outcomes, and abilities of adult learners (Finnie et al., 2010) and understand the unique needs of adults in order to promote success and to support this population (Kazis et al., 2007; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Likewise, institutions need to understand adults' backgrounds, developmental processes, and the context and methodology of adult learning in order to plan effective programs (Cupp, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), and thus develop curriculum to address their needs including offering a variety of strategies to make learning accessible. For example, adult learners typically have a lot of practical knowledge that is useful on the job but not in academics, and this may be a source of

frustration that instructors need to be aware of. Additionally, learners may be used to having one way to solve a problem and may become frustrated when asked to explore other possibilities in the learning environment. As a result, institutions need to have an awareness of adult learning styles and needs, to adequately frame learning strategies in immediately useful ways, and to use competition and repetition to deliver and review new information (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Adult learners also need guidance as to identifying their learning goals and how to reach them (Frey, 2007; Ritt, 2008). Adult students “have little patience for courses that do not help them progress towards their degree” (Frey, 2007, p. 8) and therefore need good advising, such as faculty that specialize in adult learners. An institution needs understanding staff that can support and encourage adult learners and support them to further their studies by continually reviewing and revising students' goals (Frey, 2007). Clear pathways need to be established to increase retention and degree completion including a guide with specific steps to reach a desired goal, a time line, short and long-term goals, and identification of financial needs. This will allow for on-going communication and flexibility between students and institutional staff. Adult-focused offices can help learners with many key issues, such as non-traditional scholarship programs, registration, advising, counselling, career choices, networking with other students, course or program or instructor questions, health services, parking, financial aid, housing, and community issues (Hardin, 2008).

Additionally, research suggests that orientation sessions (Cupp, 1991) and non-credit transfer programs can help to build familiarity with post-secondary practices, increase connections, and help learners prepare for exams (Frey, 2007). Other strategies

at the institutional level include having a student mentor/advisor program, hiring an 'advising and retention coordinator,' providing mandatory advising training for faculty, establishing an 'Adult Learner Committee' to work on upcoming issues, and offering opportunities for adults to complete administrative duties on line, such as paying tuition and tracking course progress (Frey, 2007). There should also be more institutional support for basic and essential skills training and an increase in program offerings in order to entice more learners back to the post-secondary classroom (Kirby et al., 2009).

A proactive approach by institutions to cover the needs of adults is one that includes flexibility, adaptability, and creativity (Compton, et al., 2006). Kazis et al. (2007) assert that adults require a 'menu' of flexible options for earning credits and prerequisites, including when, where, how, and for how long. The ability for adult and non-traditional students to pause and resume a program without re-doing courses can be critical to their success. Therefore it is beneficial for institutions to offer multiple entry, exit and re-entry points, more frequent start times throughout the year including evening and weekend courses, summer programs, and on-line courses (Kazis et al., 2007; Frey, 2007).

Adults also learn best with immediate and useful application of their knowledge, such as through case studies, role playing, simulations and self evaluations. Therefore faculty need to manage and facilitate learning, rather than just lecture, and provide direct instruction to facilitate learning. Delivery formats that have been found to be of benefit include different course formats such as face-to-face and on-line to increase accessibility, shorter-length courses or modular formats, varying durations and schedules to allow non-

traditional learners the choice to accommodate their available time, and offering classes in multiple locations (Kirby et al., 2009).

Regardless of the mode of delivery, adults need good experiences in learning environments to help them move effectively to their goals (Frey, 2007), with teaching methods that relate to their work and life experiences and include learning structured in ways that align with work settings, such as team work, group discussions, skill practice, use of technology, case studies, and group problem solving (Kazis et al., 2007; Brock, 2010). Group work for adult learners is recommended (Rogers, 2002) as it allows adult students the opportunity to interact with others with similar interests and who are also managing multiple roles (Hardin, 2008). In addition, working with others in group situations allows adults to “build on natural learning processes which all adults engage in, making these processes more conscious and more effective” (Rogers, 2002). Group work can help to decrease 'new learner anxiety' as it offers a supportive environment for the learner while providing the resources to increase the richness and complexities of the structures for learning (Rogers, 2002). Additionally, learner-centred classes have been related to higher grades, an increased sense of accomplishment amongst adult students, and an increase in overall satisfaction (Miglietti & Strange, 1998).

Kazis et al. (2007) suggest that institutions should teach developmental skills within work-related contexts and model the learning required at work. Strategies such as organizing learners into teams, incorporating work experience into classes, posting clear learning objectives, and offering many opportunities for assessment (of both student learning and of teaching quality) are important. Additionally, institutions and instructors need to recognize learner differences (Kazis et al., 2007) and better align courses with the

notion that “adult learning will occur when the adult learner has the time, not when the institution has pre-arranged it” (Bonk and Kim, quoted in Kazis et al., 2007, p. 24).

Twigg's research findings (2004) suggest that “helping students feel that they are a part of a learning community is critical to persistence, learning and satisfaction” (p. 149). Thus institutions should expand their support system to allow students to receive help from and make connections with a variety of people within the classroom and beyond to help foster a sense of community (Twigg, 2004). Therefore institutions can also support non-traditional students and adult learners by providing the opportunity for them to connect with local business people in order to help with job placement (Frey, 2007).

Therefore, to work with students, Compton et al. (2006) recommend that institutions adjust their service model in order to accommodate the reality that adult students will experience transition again and again as they shift between roles as a student, as a parent, and as a worker, and that these individuals will need support with these challenges. Student services personnel need to know the needs and characteristics of adult learners (Hardin, 2008) and validate adults' experiential learning by helping them to build a customized learning plan, supporting their distance learning options, and establishing relationships to foster supportive connections and to support the larger context of students' lives, thereby helping the whole person and not just a facet (Compton et al., 2006).

Frey (2007) and Hardin (2008) cite research from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2003) regarding their Principles of Effectiveness for Servicing Adult Learners:

1. life and career planning – assessed before or after enrolment

2. assessment of learning outcomes – look at knowledge and skills acquired and assign credit (consider formal curriculum and life skills/work experience)
3. financing – promote choice of payment options
4. teaching/learning process – use several methods to help adults connect skills and knowledge
5. support systems – assist in becoming self directed life-long learners
6. technology – enhance learning via relevant and timely info
7. strategic partnerships – connect with employers and organizations to increase opportunities
8. transitions – make sure that learning applies usefully to achieving educational and career goals

In order to make sure that the needs of students are being met, institutions must evaluate programs and reforms and continually look at the needs and circumstances of students and what can be done to support their learning endeavours (Brock, 2010; Cupp, 1991). Continuous rigorous program evaluation is important for clearly defining who should be served, identifying measurable indicators of program success, and establishing indicators of an organization's effectiveness (Lee, 2003).

Summary

Clearly, according to recent literature, there are barriers that non-traditional learners face as they attempt to access higher education programs, as summarized in this chapter. The unique needs of adult learners result in a need for instructors and institutions to change their ways of thinking and teaching in order to “address the needs

of the underserved” (Compton et al., 2006). Ultimately, the goal of post-secondary education and adult learning programs should be to create lifelong learning opportunities via effective plans for future education (Frey, 2007).

However, are these programs and supports effective, according to students? The next chapter will discuss the details of this research study regarding the educational experiences of adult learners and non-traditional students who have faced various barriers in their experiences of enrolling and succeeding at post-secondary education.

Chapter 3

The previous chapter reviewed the current literature regarding the challenges and barriers faced by post-secondary learners who have not completed a high school diploma. As discussed, a gap exists in this body of knowledge with regard to a recent exploration of the experiences of learners who return to the classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore the barriers and supports (mainly at the institutional level) experienced by students who enrolled in post-secondary studies despite not having a high school diploma. This chapter will describe how this study was accomplished, including an examination of methodology, study participants, research design and data collection, and data analysis techniques.

Methodology

As Blackmore (2005) suggests, “the complexity of [a] 'problem' is often best addressed by in-depth qualitative analysis” (p. 100). For this reason, I approached my study from a qualitative analysis methodology, focusing on survey data and focus group interviews as a way to gather information on the varied experiences and opinions of non-traditional and adult learners who returned to school. Such methodologies fit my study design, as qualitative researchers “seek to make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2006, p. 1). Indeed, qualitative research methods are used to understand social phenomena from the views and perspectives of those involved by contextualizing issues in a particular setting (Glesne, 2006).

However, as Lewin (2005) argues, “numerical data can make a valuable contribution in both quantitative and qualitative research” (p. 215) and for this reason I

also approached my study from a quantitative position. As a survey can also be used to gather quantitative data (Lewin, 2005), I included questions for the purpose of gathering numerical data. Doing so has facilitated the interpretation and description of the gathered data, as shown in Figures 2 through 9 in the following chapter.

Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies together has strengthened my study and allowed for a more thorough examination and interpretation of results. Indeed, as Lewin (2005) suggests, “the use of mixed methods...has become increasingly popular as a means to harness the strengths of both approaches” (p. 215).

However, both research methodologies have their limitations. One of the concerns is that collected qualitative data are difficult to reduce to a standard norm due to the complex and potentially interwoven variables present in participants' responses. However, the “open, emergent nature of qualitative inquiry” (Glesne, 2006, p. 19) offers rich data, and one where the researcher must look for patterns and “inherent intricacies of social interaction to honour complexity” (Glesne, 2006, p. 19). Indeed, this was a rewarding part of conducting the research and exploring the varied responses from the study participants in order to achieve a contextualized understanding through interpretation.

Another limitation of qualitative research is that the population of participants is usually relatively small in number which again limits one's ability to apply gathered data to the general population. However, my goal was not to produce generalizations in this study, but to explore the experiences of a portion of the students and to gather data from information-rich cases. Specifically, in accordance with the practices of qualitative study design, I aimed to explore the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of how participants

viewed certain issues of potential impact (Glesne, 2006).

One limitation of quantitative data collection pertinent to this study concerns the principles of sampling. During data collection I aspired to survey a representative sample of the population of students who had not obtained a high school diploma but who were registered in a post-secondary institution. However, as my participants were anonymous volunteers I cannot guarantee that they were representative of the population, or even that they truly did fit the advertised criteria. This sampling error makes it difficult to generalize my quantitative results, which, although it was not the aim of this study, does lead to concerns with regard to the reliability of the data. To combat this limitation, I included a question in the survey to confirm participants' graduation status, and also corroborated survey data with focus group interviews, as discussed below.

Research Design

Of the data collection techniques embraced by qualitative and quantitative practices, I chose to use two methods as my tools for gathering information. The purpose of using more than one method was to better substantiate my data collection and increase the trustworthiness of my data, a practice referred to as 'triangulation' (Glesne, 2006). In addition, it is ideal that a researcher would draw on a combination of techniques to provide richer data and to increase the validity of results (Glesne, 2006). For these reasons, I chose to create an anonymous on-line survey as part of the first phase of my data collection, followed by focus group interviews in order to review the data that I had collected in the survey.

At the beginning of my research, I submitted an application to the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria detailing the procedures and practices

of my study. After approval, I submitted this same information to the Research Ethics Department at the western Canadian community college where I hoped to recruit participants. After permission was granted by that college's ethics department, I began to recruit participants by posting approved fliers detailing the purpose of my study and the potential commitment required of participants for each phase of the study. Interested students were asked to contact me by email, as printed on the fliers. These notices were posted on major billboards at both of the college's campuses. Additionally, due to support from college personnel, I was able to forward study details and also the secure on-line survey link to the instructors of entry-level programs and classes designed for non-traditional learners, who then passed the information on to their students.

Throughout the recruitment and data collection period, I endeavoured to communicate to potential participants that their identity would remain confidential at all times. Students who were interested in volunteering for the study due to seeing the posted fliers contacted me by email and those addresses were viewed only by me and kept strictly confidential. For survey participants who chose to participate after receiving information from their instructors, their identity remained completely anonymous as they were able to access the survey link independently.

Participants who completed the anonymous survey were asked to first review the Letter of Informed Consent (included on the survey page), detailing study information, implied consent and withdrawal information, and information regarding anonymity and dissemination of survey results. By commencing the survey, participants indicated that they were consenting to be a part of the study, and that closing the survey web page window without clicking on 'submit' would destroy any entered data, thereby removing

participants' data should they decide to withdraw from the study. Participants were informed that it would be logistically impossible to withdraw questionnaire data after submission due to the anonymous nature of the on-line survey. Participants were fully informed of everything that would be required of them prior to the start of the research session, and no intentional deception was employed.

The on-line survey portion of the data collection was created using the Canadian-based program Fluid Surveys. This company was chosen due to the fact that the data base is located in Canada, whereas other on-line survey engines are located in the United States and collected data would be subject to United States laws and screening. Thus, to protect the privacy of my participants, I chose to create the survey using Fluid Survey software.

Data Collection

The aim of my research study was to illuminate the barriers and supports experienced by non-traditional students who enrol in post-secondary education. Thus survey questions were created with this focus in mind and were designed to include suggested barriers and supports as reported in the current literature discussed in this thesis. I chose to focus on the institutional barriers or supports that students may face, and thus did not create many questions that offered data with regard to educational, situational, or psychological factors that students may encounter (please see Appendix A for survey questions).

Thirty-six participants completed the on-line survey during the three weeks that it was made in October 2011. Of those participants, five contacted me with regard to being interested in taking part in focus group interviews. A mutually convenient time and date

was set for the interview, but unfortunately one participant could not attend at the last minute and another did not show to the meeting. As a result, three participants met with me for a focus group discussion that centred on the results gathered from the on-line survey.

Participants were invited to complete the survey at a time convenient to them. In accordance with recommendations for survey creation (Lewin, 2005), the survey was 15 questions long, and included both short answer and open-ended responses (see Appendix A). I endeavoured to use simple wording for all of the questions and designed the first set of questions to be easy to answer in order to encourage further participation. For questions where participants had to rate options on a scale, an odd scale degree (from 1 to 5) allowed participants to remain neutral.

There are potential data collection challenges when using an on-line survey for data collection, including potentially reducing the participation rate for those who do not have home access to the Internet. However, computer labs are available to enrolled students at the college in this study, and my hope was that students would use this available technology if need be. Additionally, as the survey is a print-based tool for collecting data, there is cause for concern that students who struggle with working with print-based text may feel frustrated by the format, or may decline to participate due to discomfort or lack of comprehension. Unfortunately I was not able to arrange text reading supports when the survey was created, although there are many programs that exist that could help a student to read printed text independently. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey design, I was not able to ensure that students were aware of these supports and thus their input could conceivably be limited by this factor.

Another limitation of the on-line survey is the element of bias discussed by Lewin in that “respondents may not always answer accurately or may give the answer that they feel is expected” (Lewin, 2005, p. 220). It is for this reason of validity that I advertised for additional participants to volunteer their time to be part of a focus group interview in order to review survey data results.

The focus group interview was advertised in a similar way as the survey, using posted fliers. Additionally, at the bottom of the on-line survey I inserted a short sentence thanking participants for their information and offering an opportunity for interested students to contact me by email if they wished to review the results as part of a focus group interview. For those that contacted me, my next step was to email focus group volunteers back individually with information outlining the goals and procedures of the focus group sessions and the research study in general. Attached to the email was the Participant Consent Form, which detailed information on participant consent and withdrawal. For participants who were still willing to commit to a focus group interview, a meeting was set at a mutually convenient time at a public library meeting room, in late October after the close of the on-line survey link. This allowed for a neutral setting, ease of transportation (since all public libraries are on bus routes and many offer free parking), and for those participants with childcare challenges it provided a suitable on-site activity for youngsters.

At the focus group meeting, I welcomed participants and again read the study's goals and policies including details regarding withdrawal and consent. I invited the participants to stay or go at any time. All inherent risks were shared with participants, and if a volunteer chose to withdraw, they were aware that they had the opportunity to

give permission for their data up to the withdrawal point to be included or excluded in the study. Participants signed the Letter of Consent before the interview began, and participants were informed that oral data was to be recorded via audio cassette and that it would be kept secure until the termination of the study, at which point it will be destroyed. Focus group participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of the information shared during the session and to not disclose names or identifying details to anyone outside of the room.

There are risks involved in conducting focus group interviews, including that during reflection of the process of applying and enrolling in post-secondary education, participants may display anxiety with regard to their experiences as a non-traditional learner. However it was my hope that by reflecting, participants would come to see their post-secondary enrolment as a huge and positive step and that they would offer feedback and suggestions for ways to make investigating, enrolling, and succeeding at post-secondary studies an easier experience for others. It was my hope that by being heard, participants who found themselves feeling emotionally or psychologically discomforted would be able to voice their concerns and frustrations and be able to move on. Additionally, being that focus group participants had already completed the on-line survey, they had time to reflect on their own answers and were hopefully better prepared to speak personally and objectively about the survey results in order to add depth and validity to the data. A strategy that I was prepared to use involved focusing on the positive results of participants' feedback including the value that sharing anxieties or frustrations has on offering information on how policies and programs could be adapted to better serve students.

There was a possibility that a focus group participant would be a former student of the school that I currently work at. In this event I was prepared to make sure that the participant was assured that I had no power over his or her marks or standing at the host college, and that he or she would be treated the same as other participants with regard to confidentiality and non-disclosure, as per the Participant Consent Document.

Additional potential challenges included the time required for participants to attend the focus group interview (I planned to restrict the required time to 90 minutes), child care challenges (hopefully mitigated by meeting at the public library where children's programs are often scheduled), and transportation inconveniences (public libraries are all on major bus routes and most offer free parking).

Study Participants

The aim of my study was to retrieve data from students currently enrolled in post-secondary education despite the fact that they had not achieved a high school diploma with their same-age peers. The western Canadian community college chosen for this study offers many foundational skills program and up-grading options which made this institution an ideal setting from which to draw participants.

Thus, study participants were a voluntary sample of competent adult learners who had not completed secondary school but are currently enrolled in post-secondary studies. Since the on-line questionnaire was anonymous, I have no way of identifying the age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or position of my research participants.

My goal was to recruit 40-60 volunteers to complete the on-line survey (as recommended for qualitative research according to Lewin (2005)), and four to six volunteers to participate in the focus group interview. Although no compensation was

offered for participants, I was hopeful that the intrinsic benefits of volunteering would encourage participation. These benefits include positive reassurance on one's decision to return to school, feeling power through offering feedback, feelings of validation on having one's comments heard and passed on to others so that improvements can be made, and feelings of pride for having enrolled despite not having a secondary school graduation diploma.

Data Analysis Techniques

As mentioned previously, the need to gather personal experiences in qualitative research is key to understanding phenomena from the perspectives of those involved. For this reason, I collected both qualitative and quantitative data from the on-line survey and organized it thematically in order to better make sense of the ways that these personal narratives intersected. And, as mentioned above, using focus group interviews to triangulate my results helped me to clarify data by way of 'member checking' which is to share gathered data (with any personally identifying information removed) with participants to make sure that I am representing them and their ideas accurately (Glesne, 2006).

This process of sharing my interpretation of results with participants also helped to reduce the risk of researcher bias. In talking with participants I reflected on my own subjectivity (Glesne, 2006) which no doubt played a role as I gathered and organized survey results. I endeavoured to avoid too much interpretation of survey results so as to avoid skewing the data, and I am hopeful that the focus group interviews helped me to better generate rigorous and relevant analysis of my data.

Conducting focus group interviews allowed me to explore some of the survey

topics with greater detail. I was aware that although I began the focus group with a set goal and agenda, I was prepared to modify or abandon my questions in favour of pursuing relevant discussions. Overall, the goal was to interrogate data for the purpose of searching for answers to questions with the hope of finding evidence to either support or refute my emerging theories (Somekh, Stronach, Lewin, Nolan, & Stake, 2005).

Summary

This chapter has detailed the methodology, the methods, the participants, and the data collection techniques used in my study. The following chapter will discuss the results that were obtained in accordance with the processes described above.

Chapter 4

This chapter will present the results of my study according to participant input through the on-line survey. Additionally, data gathered from the focus group session will be provided throughout to add anecdotal support to survey results. A short discussion of the participation rates of volunteers in the study will be followed by results from the two data gathering methods, organized by theme.

Study Participant Characteristics

Thirty-six students volunteered to participate in the anonymous on-line survey, and three of those participants took part in the focus group interview that was held after the survey results were collected. Although no personally identifying information was gathered from participants at any time, general characteristics were collected based on responses to questions 2, 3, and 11 of the survey.

Of the 36 participants in the survey portion of this study, 31 indicated that they did not graduate from high school (86% of respondents) and five indicated that they had graduated from high school (14%). Survey participants were then asked how old they were when they received a high school graduation certificate (see Figure 2). Six participants (17%) indicated that high school graduation had been achieved under the age of 22, 12 respondents (33%) indicated that they had achieved graduation between ages 23 and 25, and nine participants (25%) responded that a diploma had been granted when they were in the age range of 26 to 29. Eight respondents indicated that no certificate or diploma had been achieved (22%), and one respondent did not answer this question.

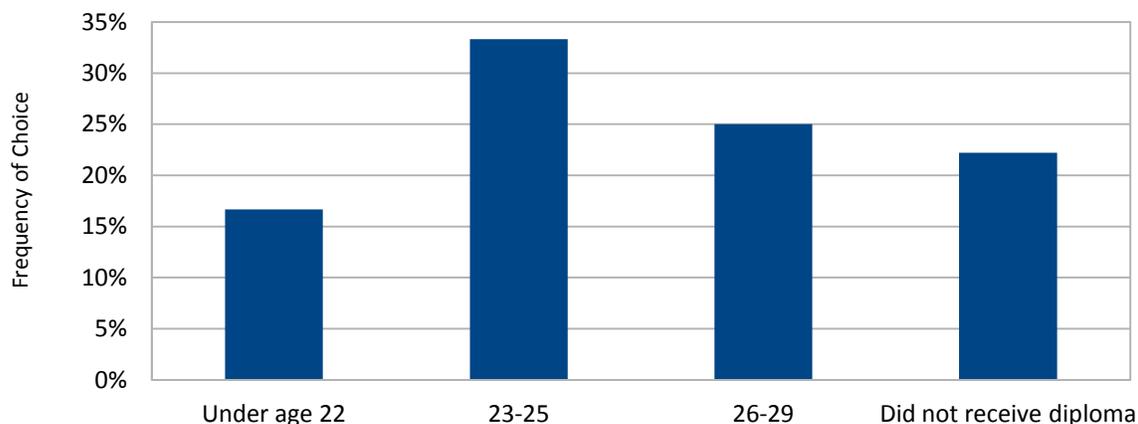


Figure 2. Age of survey participants when high school diploma was achieved.

The three focus group participants discussed these results briefly during the group interview and commented on the fact that some fellow students had been able to enter their desired program without having completed a high school diploma, but many had to do up-grading first. One focus group member explained that

“I didn't graduate from high school, and it was hard for me to return to any kind of schooling. But when I did enrol at [the college] an advisor told me that I could upgrade my Math and English and then start [my program]. I didn't need to actually get a high school certificate first. This saved me a lot of time and kept me motivated to keep going to school. So I haven't officially graduated from high school, but next year I'll have my [program certificate].”

In the latter part of the survey (question 11), respondents were asked if they had ever felt the desire to drop out, and why. Twenty-nine participants (81%) indicated that they had not felt the desire to drop out, six participants (17%) responded that yes, they had felt the desire to drop out, and one participant did not answer this question. In the

comment box of this question, survey participants who had indicated that they had felt the desire to drop out cited reasons such as “personal conflicts,” “not enuf [sic] time in my life,” and “not sure what program I wanted to take, so it felt like I was spinning my wheels at the time.”

These results were shared at the focus group interview, and participants in this forum discussed factors such the challenge of having enough time for school when working, feelings of frustration over not being able to keep up with homework, worries about affording future programs and classes, and difficulty with getting time off work or missing family commitments to study. As one focus group member stated “a [student] in my program was having a real tough time with getting the assignments done because of work [schedules] and also wanting to spend time with family. [The student] was questioning whether to continue or not, but a few of us told [the student] to go talk to the teachers and I think that helped.”

One focus group participant offered an explanation as to why the majority of survey respondents had not felt the need to drop out: “most of us are back at school cause we want to be here, and we are ready to make the commitment. And if you are having troubles, you have to be mature enough to solve it and not just quit. Some people have it hard in their lives, but it helps to talk to other students and know that you're not alone.” Another focus group participant said “I've never felt like dropping out cause then I'll end up right where I used to be, and I don't want that. I need to pass my classes and get my certificate...so I can get a better job. Sometimes things ain't easy, but I've failed before and I don't want that to be me again.”

Access to Post-Secondary Programs

Three of the survey questions generated data on the topic of how and why students had accessed programs at this western Canadian college. Question 1 of the survey (see Figure 3) asked respondents why they chose to register at this college as opposed to another institution, and respondents had the option of choosing more than one answer. 'Location' and 'Reputation' scored equally at 8% of the votes each, whereas 'Programs' scored 31% of the votes and 'Program Cost' was clearly the most important factor at 44%. Four votes (10%) were tabulated in the 'Other' option, but unfortunately all four respondents who chose this option chose not to enter a reason in the text box provided in the survey.

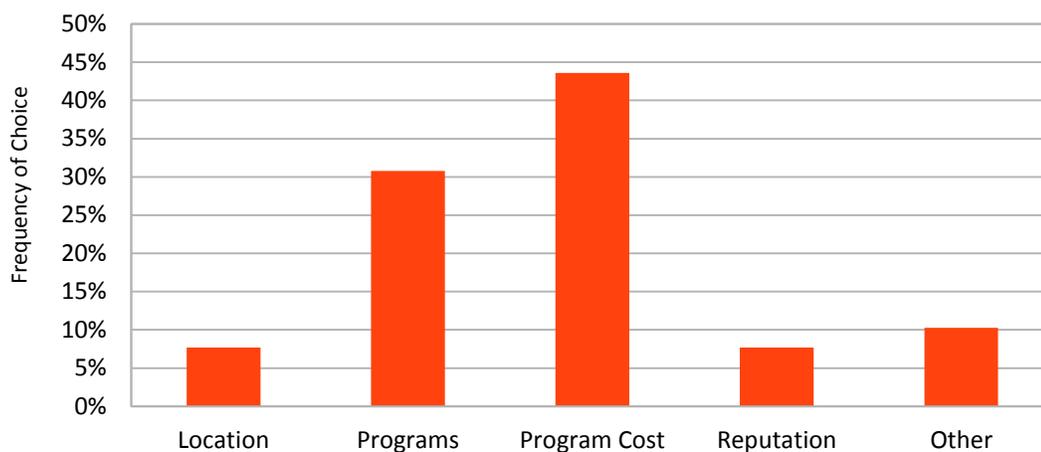


Figure 3. Why respondents chose to register at this institution.

Focus group participants suggested reasons such as “no other choice” and “good instructors” as reasons to register at this institution, but all members of the focus group agreed that program offerings and cost were of major importance. One focus group member stated

“I was missing some credits when I came to [this college] cause I hadn't graduated. I had to upgrade my Math and English. When I found out how far back I had to go [in course levels] I was pretty disappointed, but the fact that most of the courses were free made it easier for me. Also I could work at my own pace. I think that without [both of these factors] I would have probably just walked away and not come back to school. And I would have regretted it, but to be honest, for me it's about time and money.”

Focus group participants all agreed that the range of programs offered at the college in this study was good, and that having many options was important “because not everyone wants to study Psychology or English. It's nice to see a school that offers all the trades and tons of other programs, cause that way there's bound to be something for everyone, even if you don't know what that something is for you, yet.”

Question 4 of the survey asked respondents to indicate how they had gained access to post-secondary programs, even though they may not have achieved a high school diploma (see Figure 4). Participants were able to choose more than one option for this question. Thirty-eight percent of respondents chose 'College Prep Program,' 13% chose 'Foundations Classes,' 5% chose 'Direct Program Entry,' 5% chose 'B.E.S.T. Program,' and 35% chose the 'Employment Training Program.' Two participants (5%) chose 'Other' as their initial program, and both respondents indicated 'Bridges Program' in the text field as their method of entry.

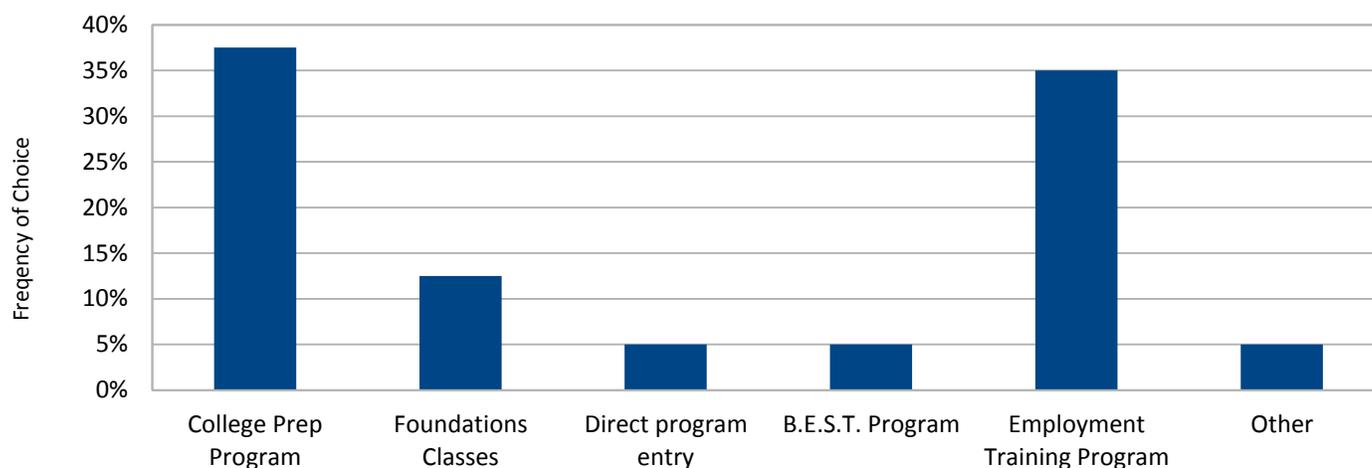


Figure 4. Survey respondents' method of access or initial program of study.

Question 5 of the survey asked participants how they knew that these programs had existed at this post-secondary institution (see Figure 5). The majority of respondents (39%) chose 'Word of mouth/friend/relative' while the next most popular methods of information were 'Other' (24%) and 'Academic Advisor' (21%). 'High School Counsellor' (9%) and 'Advertisement' (6%) were the chosen the least. Survey participants who selected 'Other' provided details in the text box including “through Bridges for Women program,” “counselor, women in transition,” “help center,” “internet,” and “community agency.”

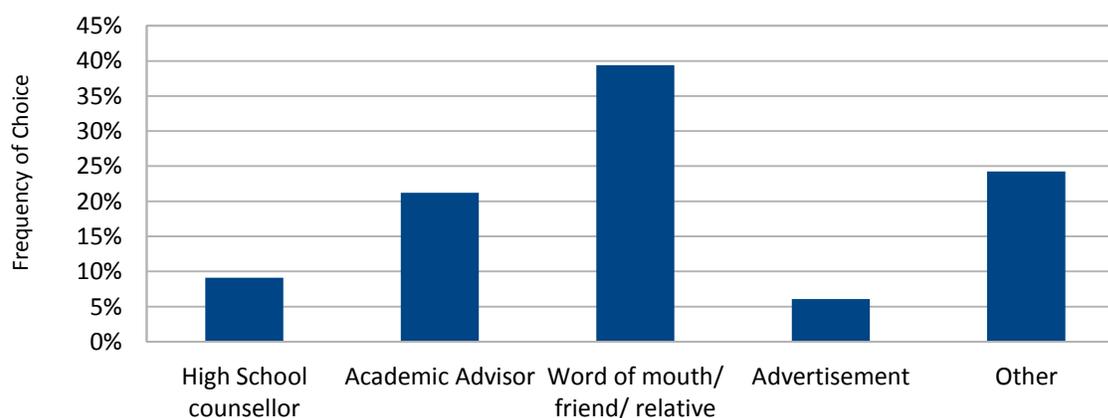


Figure 5. How participants knew that programs existed.

Focus group participants were quick to praise the number of options available at their institution, and agreed that talking to other people was the best way to get information about what was available to students. One focus group member said “me, personally, I didn't spend much time talking to [an academic advisor] but I know that others did and got some good ideas about the programs that were out there.” Focus group members could not recall seeing advertising when they were looking to begin their studies, but said that they would have been interested in finding out more about the programs available if they had seen or heard an advertisement.

Interview members all agreed that making that first phone call to the college's admissions department was difficult but that they got their questions answered and were given some good suggestions as to how to proceed. Initially, however, information was most frequently gathered from friends, family or by word of mouth. One focus group member told of this chance encounter:

I was getting my hair cut at the place I always go to and the woman next to me was talking to her hairdresser about how her neighbour had just gone back to school, and she was in her 40s. But she was going back to upgrade and do a dental hygiene program, I think. Anyway, it got me to thinking that if that woman could do it, so could I. So I butted into their conversation and asked about it, and then called [the college] to find out more. The guy I talked to about registration was real helpful and got me on the right track.

Barriers to Study

The on-line survey included three questions relating to possible barriers that

students may have faced, or may continue to face, in their educational journey. Question 6 was an open-ended question asking participants what their biggest academic-related concerns were with regard to returning to school. Participants shared a variety of reasons in the text field provided, such as “writing essays and research papers,” “social anxiety in a classroom,” “being assessed and failing would be a concern,” “my English skills,” “getting the assistance [sic] I need,” and “being unsure of what we're learning and falling behind, like high school.” Many participants made reference to not knowing what courses they needed to take, and the fear of having to take academic subjects that had not gone well in high school.

Focus group participants were quick to agree with the data collected from this question, and each member commented on how their biggest concerns had to do with being able to keep up to the work load as they became a student again. One focus group member said “it's been a while since I was in a classroom...and high school didn't go well for me either. So I was afraid that this would be the same situation and that I wouldn't get what was going on cause I'm not a good reader.” Another focus group participant shared a story of finding out that “I had to do a lot of upgrading and I felt a sense of panic that I might fail these beginner courses and not even get to start my program. That would be humiliating.” All focus group members and five survey participants mentioned concerns about sitting in a classroom setting again and having to work with others, and the fear that this would expose academic weaknesses. One focus group participant bravely shared that “I am not a strong student. I've got troubles with reading and writing and taking notes. That's why I dropped out of high school cause I knew I looked different from the other kids. I was afraid that would happen again. I was ready to do more work and try

harder, but I know I've got troubles.”

Another focus group participant offered this insight:

“I think that when you've had a history of failing at school it makes it really hard to get motivated to come back and try it again. As adults we want to do better, but we always feel like we might not do as good as the other students. You can get discouraged pretty quick when you've had bad memories of school or feel like you can't do it. It's hard to get motivated to ask for help when you feel like you're the only one that doesn't get it.”

Question 9 asked participants about their biggest non-academic concerns and asked them to choose all the categories that applied to them (see Figure 6). The majority of the responses were for 'Financial' concerns (44%), followed by 'Personal' (27%), 'Other' (18%) and 'Social' (11%). Three participants elected to specify their concerns in the text box provided, supplying information such as 'health,' 'putting off other things I want,' and 'getting stressed out cause my day is to [sic] busy.'

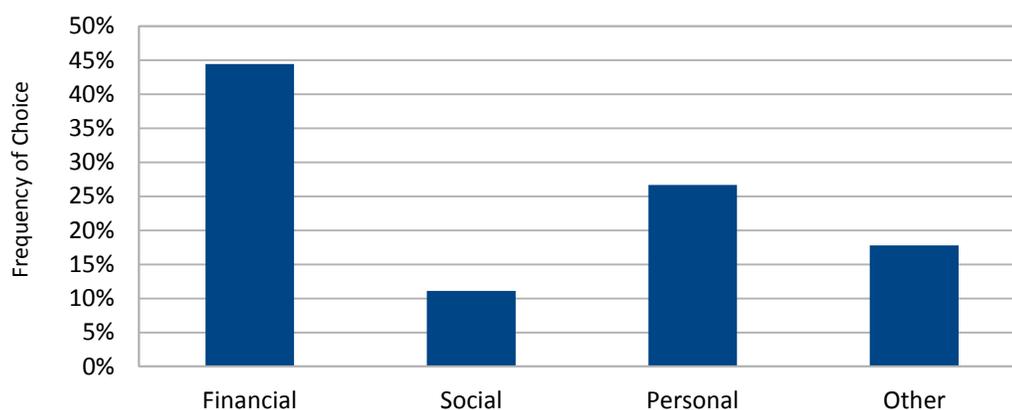


Figure 6. Non-academic concerns regarding enrolling in post-secondary education.

Focus group interviewees were very quick to unanimously agree that finances were a big source of stress for students. One student said “the money is the worst part. I know people in my program that have kids and work two jobs. I don't know how they have time for homework or anything else. I am still working, and it makes taking classes and doing homework really hard. I worry about paying rent and if my car breaks down. Everything is in a fine balance right now, but my savings are all used up.”

A major concern voiced by each focus group member was the recent news regarding government cuts to the funding of the basic upgrading courses. One focus group member suggested that “if funding is cut, I don't know how some people will be able to afford to return to school. It's not cheap to get an education as an adult, even if you're working. Going to school means taking time off work but you've still got bills to pay. If tuition keeps going up, I know a lot of people who won't be able to afford to go to school. And that's really sad.” These sentiments were echoed by the other participants at the focus group and another student added that “money can be the make-it-or-break-it factor. Sure there's the potential of a better career at the end of the training, but the people who need to go to school are the ones that can't afford it. If tuition keeps going up, I won't be able to afford to finish [my program].”

Focus group members agreed that finding time for school with a busy life schedule was difficult, and staying motivated to do homework late at night after family and home responsibilities were attended to was a constant challenge. One focus group member was brought to tears and commented that

“for me, it's personal challenges. I go to school, I work, I have stuff to do around the house, I have homework, and I want to spend time with my kids. I'm not

always there to put them to bed at night. I want to make life better for them, which is why I came back to school, but I also have to give up time with them in order to do my homework and go to class... I have to organize someone to look after my kids and it's expensive and hard to juggle all the places I have to be and things I have to do. But I've gotta work to keep the bills paid and finish my program. It's hard to keep the stress separate from my kids.”

On the subject of 'social' barriers, focus group participants offered information such as feeling out of place as an older person returning to school, and feeling disconnected with the college atmosphere. One participant said:

“I am still nervous of going to a new classroom and finding that I am the oldest one in the room. It's getting better, but I find that young people treat me differently, and some teachers treat me differently too. Sometimes I have stories to tell or I have some experience with what we're talking about, but no one asks my opinions. And I see the signs around campus for parties and pub crawls and things like that, but that's not my scene, so I feel out of place.”

However, another focus group member added that “I see more people my age around campus, and even if I don't participate in all of the 'young crowd' stuff I do feel more comfortable knowing that I'm not the only 'oldie' on campus these days.”

Question 14 was an open-ended question and asked participants if there have been policies, barriers, or obstacles that have increased their level of frustration or stress or limited their academic success at post-secondary education. Survey participants were prompted to provide information in a text box. The majority of respondents (30 students, or 83%) wrote that no, they have not had any such experience, and one student added that

the college was “very inclusive and safe.” Two participants indicated that personal challenges were an obstacle (“sickness” and “my physical challenges”), and two participants commented on the need for more funding and more programs at the college. One participant did not provide a text response.

Focus group participants were able to add more information to this topic and for the most part their comments were positive as they reflected on their experiences. Comments included appreciating the on-line options for paying tuition, registering, and searching course information; access to the college's Help Centres; and good information from academic advisors.

However, discussion at the focus group interview quickly shifted to areas of frustration for students, and comments were made regarding institutional charges and fees (application fees, bus pass fees, cost of books, medical and dental charges, and childcare fees were specified). Participants recognized the necessity of these fees but were frustrated by what one focus group member termed “nickel and diming.”

Another focus group member commented that “it feels like the fees are always going up. Courses are more expensive, it seems harder to get financial aid information, and there are little fees for everything. I know that some of these are not made by the college, but when you're on a tight budget it's frustrating to see your total climb up and up.” Another focus group participant reflected on the cost of parking:

“I hate paying for parking. I have to pay for a U-pass for the bus but I never ride the bus because I have to take my kids to daycare and I can't do that on the bus, so I have to drive. And the parking is expensive. And I can't park and ride because I need to rush to class and then rush to work and there's just no time to wait for a

bus, so I pay for the bus for nothing. AND parking too. It's a lot of money that I don't have.”

Other barriers cited by focus group members included difficulty talking with some instructors outside of class time due to restricted office hours (although each focus group participant listed several college faculty members that showed great flexibility with meeting students' scheduling needs or communicating by phone or email); challenges with having courses available when needed or having to wait for a few months for the next session to begin; lack of availability of some classes in the evenings or during the summer months; and teaching methods. One focus group member said:

“I find lecture-style lessons really boring. I like it when we work in group settings because then I can talk with others, but not in front of the whole class. So it's easier to share my ideas in a small group and problem solve with people. Some teachers get us to just do essays and stuff and that's not for me. I was bad at that in high school and I still am. But I'm good at talking and listening to other people and sharing ideas that way.”

Another member added “yeah, the classes where you do group projects are good. The ones where all you have are essays and tests are just like high school. I get stressed just thinking about it and I don't think I learn as well.”

Another topic discussed was budget constraints felt at the college in all programs. One participant voiced feelings about general budget challenges:

“I know that the college has a budget and that they keep getting their money clawed back. It's frustrating for us as students when courses aren't available because of staffing cuts, or money has to go to the programs that draw more

students, rather than the basic programs that I need. Just because I'm not 18 years old and a star student doesn't mean I'm any less important, but I know the college has to make decisions sometimes where to spend the money. There just isn't enough of it, and it's a problem for all of us.”

Sources of Support

Question 7 on the survey asked participants to respond in a text box with regard to what supports or assistance the college has offered that made the return to classroom easier, if at all. Ten survey participants cited “empathetic teachers” and “instructor support” as major sources of support, and two students commented on the supportive environment of the college as a whole. One student wrote that they found support through “Bridges environment and counselors, [which provided an] atmosphere of acceptance and support and encouragement and inclusion.” Four students indicated that faculty made them “feel like I belonged” and “made me feel supported.”

Three students cited their own willingness to work hard and to learn as a mature learner as a source of support, and one student summed up the comments of many by writing that “talking to the instructor of the program was very helpful to me.” Seven students made comments about financial aid and book stipends being helpful in easing the burden of returning to studies and one student wrote that support was felt at the financial aid office on campus for “assistance in finding the funding that existed that I could apply for.” Three students commented that taking upgrading courses was helpful for them.

Focus group participants echoed the above sentiments, adding that instructor support was very helpful. One member of the group interview commented that “having

my teachers understand my position as an adult learner was great...they seemed to 'get it' when I had to be away because of work or my kids and that I wasn't just skipping class.” Another participant added that “when I had a good teacher that offered help all the time and actually was available to help it made me more likely to ask for help if I needed it. Sometimes it feels like an empty offer, but a lot of the teachers at [my college] really do want to help.” One of the focus group participants added that upgrading courses were helpful: “I was really disappointed when I found out [through assessment tests] that I had to take upgrading courses, but [these courses] really helped me to ease back into being a student, and to refresh some things. It was helpful when I started [my program] because I had just learned some of the stuff and some people hadn't done it since high school. So I felt confident.”

Similarly, question 12 asked participants to choose options from a list to indicate what supports had helped or supported them in deciding to continue with their education during challenging times. Participants had the option of choosing all options that applied to them (see Figure 7). The most frequently chosen response in this list was 'Instructor Support' (24%), followed by 'Family or friend support' (19%), 'Program design/flexibility' (17%), and 'Other students in the program' (13%). 'Teaching methods' was chosen 11% of the time, 'Student Help Centres' was chosen 6% of the time, 'Academic, career or life counselling' was chosen 5% of the time, and 'Student support networks' was chosen 3% of the time. Three participants (3%) chose 'Other' but only one participant specified an answer in the text box (“Bridges for Women society”).

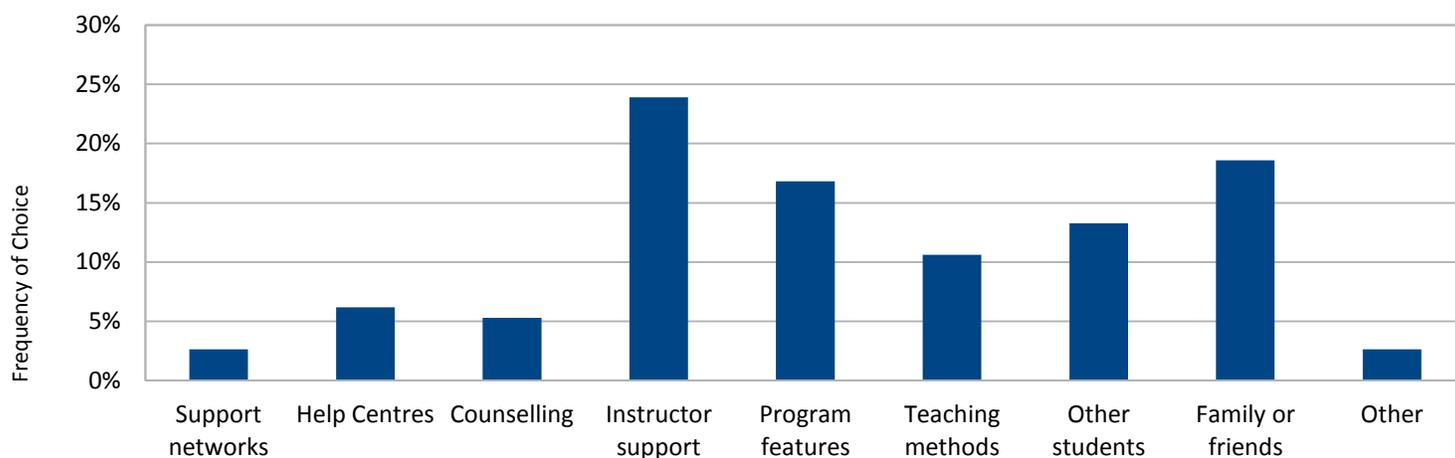


Figure 7. Supports that helped students to decide to continue with studies during challenging times.

When these results were shared with the focus group participants, all members of the interview agreed with the results. One member of the group added “it was important to me that my family understood what I was going through. It was hard for them to understand how much work I had to do, and there were tense times at the beginning. Plus I was really stressed when I first started cause it was a hard transition. Now it's a bit easier, and we've worked out a balance at home, most days. But they are all very supportive, and that helps.” Another participant added that “it has been helpful to talk to other people in my classes. Sometimes I'm too shy to do it, but when we are in groups and we get to talking I realize that I'm not the only one that is juggling a ton of responsibilities and we can kind of laugh at things and share our struggles and understand each other. It's nice to know I'm not the only one who's having troubles with things.”

Question 10 on the survey asked participants to rate a selection of student support services offered at this community college as to their importance due to direct experience. Respondents rated each service on a scale of 1 (‘least helpful or important’) to 5 (‘most

helpful or important'), or chose 'not applicable' (see Figure 8). Most options received values of '4' or '5' with some notable exceptions. With regard to help centres, 20% of respondents had rated it as 'not applicable' although those who had direct experience with help centre services rated it more frequently as a '4' or a '5.' Similarly, 'student support networks (such as mentoring programs)' was rated as 'not applicable' by 42% of students, although 27% rated it as a '5' and no participants rated it as a '1.' The last option, 'Technology,' was rated as 'not applicable' by only 9% of respondents and as a '3' or higher by the remaining respondents.

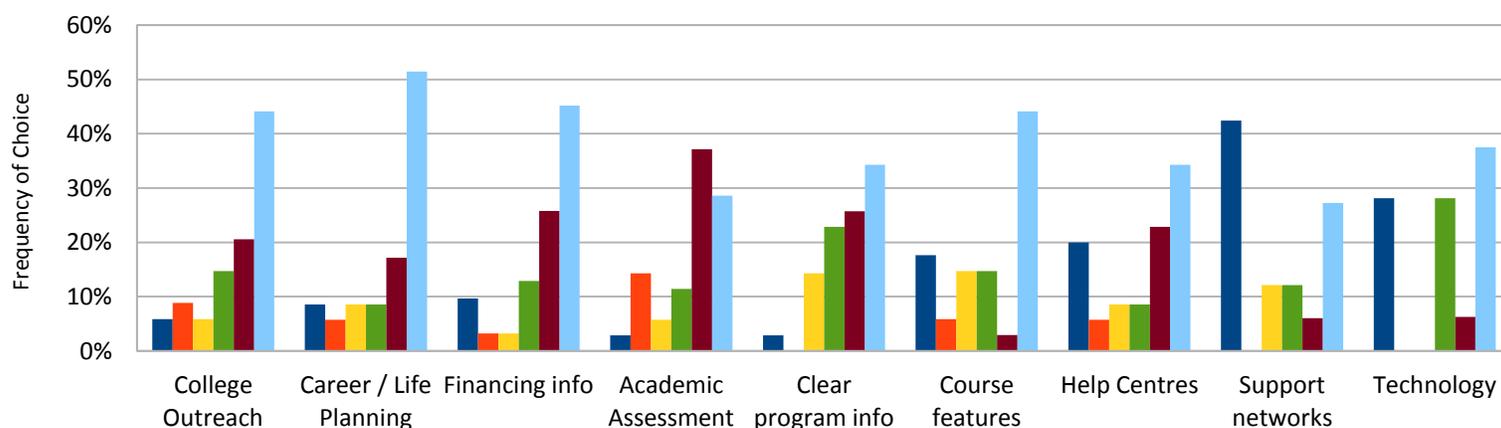


Figure 8. Importance of supports during post-secondary education (based on direct experience). Bar values represent (from left to right) respondents' assigned values of 'not applicable,' 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 where '1' is 'not very useful' and '5' is 'very useful.'

Focus group participants were shown this collected data and given the opportunity to comment on some of the results. All participants felt that the data was accurate for their own experiences, although one participant added that “I'd like to know more about what student support networks are out there that people are experiencing...I chose 'not applicable' for that question cause I've never participated in something like that.”

Another student said “I think I'd find the Student Help Centre helpful but I can never seem to find the time to go. I think it's a good idea though.”

Participants' Recommendations

Questions 8, 13, and 15 asked participants to reflect on given suggestions and to share their own ideas regarding additional supports that could enhance the post-secondary learning environment for non-traditional students. Question 8 was open-ended and asked participants what additional supports, assistance or programs would be helpful or would contribute to academic success. Three students wrote that 'career counseling' would be supportive, and six students commented that “more programs” would be helpful, although none of the students provided specific information about this. Twelve students commented on needing more funding for students including the statement that “financial support would be helpful,” and one student wrote “bigger collage [sic] budget.”

Two survey participants suggested that a mandatory orientation session might be helpful to aid students in getting to know the campus and the supports available. Three students commented on needing more childcare options, including “on-campus child-care that is actually affordable for students.” One survey respondent suggested that students receive more information about workplace relations: “I find it hard to get my boss to understand that I need time off to study. Maybe my boss needs to come to the campus and see what I go through in my classes haha.” Five survey respondents commented on a desire for co-op style programs that allow students to partner up with community employers, or the value of scheduling Employment Fairs to showcase local employers for students to meet and gather information from.

When these ideas were shared with the focus group members, each one felt that

having more connections between the college and community employers would indeed be beneficial. “[Career fairs] would help us to stay motivated, knowing what kinds of jobs are out there and what we need to do to get there” said one member. Another student added that “it would be great to have co-op options, even at the basic levels, so that students can feel that they're on the right track. And even if they do have lots of schooling to do, they can feel that there's something out there for them at the end.”

With regard to the orientation session proposed by two survey respondents, focus group members echoed that this might be a good idea as a way to introduce college services to students: “I think that kind of thing should be done regularly. It would be useful to have our teacher or someone come into our classes after the first few sessions to remind us what supports are on campus for us. There's so much to remember that it's nice to hear it regularly and meet the staff and see where they do the help centre and stuff like that.”

Another focus group interviewee told a story of a friend at a different institution: “as part of her first year classes, her English instructor took the class to the library and they spent a few classes learning how to do research and write an essay. It sounded dead boring to me when she told me about it, but now when I'm faced with writing an essay or have to respond to something in writing I wish that my class had done something like that.”

Question 13 provided a list of programs that research shows have been useful for learners (see Figure 9). Participants were asked to indicate whether the programs would be useful to them by rating them on a scale of 1 (meaning 'not very useful') to 5 (meaning 'very useful'). 'Orientation sessions,' 'group work,' and 'the ability to start, stop or pause a

program' all received a rating of '5' from 50% or more of the survey respondents. The remaining three categories were well spread on the 5-point value scale, with respondents seemingly just as likely to rate an option as a '1' as they were to consider it as a '5.'

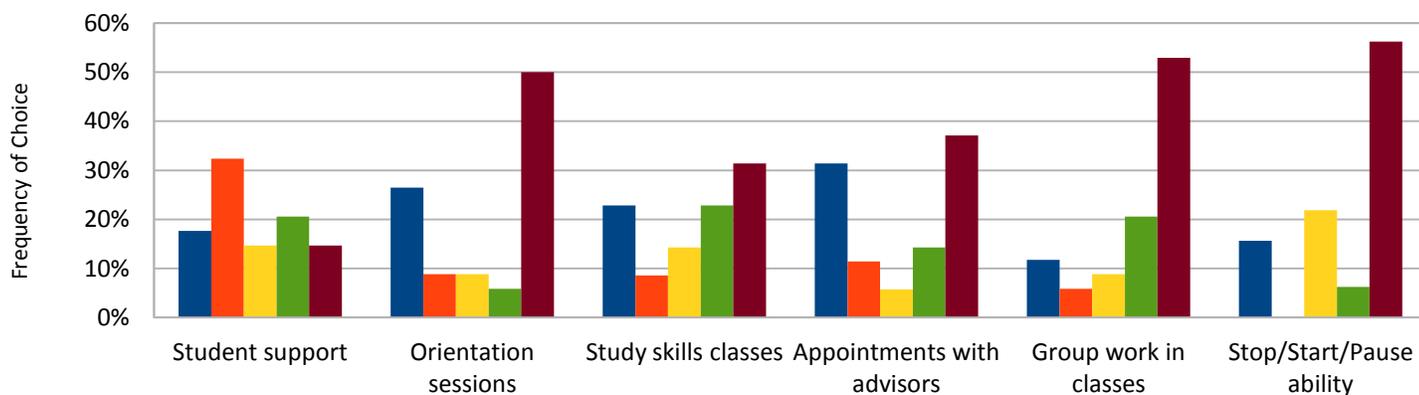


Figure 9. Participants' indications as to whether suggested programs would be useful. Bar values represent (from left to right) respondents' assigned values of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 where '1' is 'not very useful' and '5' is 'very useful.'

Focus group members were shown this data and had an opportunity to discuss the results. Interviewees were quick to agree with the final option in the question regarding the ability to start, stop or pause a program at various points and commented on how important that is for working students and students with family commitments. “It is nice to know that I can work at my own pace if I need to, or that I can stop for a while if things come up and I won't be penalized” said one focus group member. Another member added: “I think that this is very important for adult students, the ability to set your own pace and your own schedule. As adults we have time constraints and commitments, and it's one less thing to be stressed about if you can set your own schedule.”

Two focus group members felt that regular appointments with an Academic

Advisor would be helpful to stay on the right track, but one focus group member felt that such services were not necessary: “if I need advice, I'll seek it out.” However, this focus group member was quickly rebutted by another focus group interviewee by the comment “yes, but sometimes you don't know what you're missing, or that you could do things in a faster or better way. It's useful to have someone keeping an eye out for you, someone who knows how the college works and knows all the programs.”

One focus group member was surprised by the low rating given to 'student support networks': “maybe I don't know what this means, but I think it would be really useful to get together with students who have done the programs that I'm in and hear what they went through and what helped them and stuff.” A focus group member listening to this commented on the lack of time that many students had, and wondered how such a program could run successfully: “it would be nice to know that others are in the same boat, but I don't have time to sit and have coffee with strangers just to wallow in self pity! I would rather just talk with people in my classes cause we're all there at the same time...people help each other out most of the time when they know what's going on.” However, this same focus group member later commented that “it would be nice to talk to people who have gone through the program before us so that I can ask questions and see what they did. It would be neat if past grads came back to talk to beginning classes and answer questions right then, or offered their contact info for later questions.”

'Group work' received strong support both with the on-line survey and with the focus group members. One interviewee commented that “group work is kind of what I do at my job, really. We get together and try to solve things. So doing it in the classroom just makes sense. It's better than listening to a teacher talk the whole class, anyway.”

Another focus group member added that “I don't like to speak out in front of the whole class, so doing group work is easier for me to share ideas. Sometimes it's challenging, but as an adult you have to learn to work with others. And you learn a lot.”

Focus group members were divided with regard to the value of study skills classes. One interviewee commented: “I think this kind of thing is really useful. I wish I had taken something like that at the beginning. I didn't know it existed. It would have really helped me to feel better when I started my program cause I didn't have good study skills in high school.” Another focus group member countered this by asking when a student would take such a course: “our days are already full...I don't see when I would attend a class or a session like this. I think it sounds great and useful and all, but I just want to go to school and get my program done and not do anything extra.”

Question 15 was the final question of the survey and asked participants to describe any areas where they felt their college might consider making adjustments or modifications that could result in a more supportive environment for the success of returning learners or mature students. Unfortunately, only 16 participants (44%) responded to this question. Data entered in text boxes included comments such as “encourage more older women,” “make a better budget,” “keep tuition affordable,” and “keep tuition low so that people can attend.” Other survey respondents wrote comments that centred on adult learners, such as “be sympathetic to working people,” “recognize that adults have different needs and we might miss class for different reasons,” and a few comments that indicated that “adult students need to work harder than younger students and teachers need to remember this.”

As the focus group meeting came to a close, interviewees had an opportunity to

add any last thoughts and to make suggestions for improvements. All of the focus group members echoed the sentiments collected through the on-line survey data, and added again that increased funding and financial support for returning students would be of great value.

All interviewees agreed that although there were challenging times for each of them in various areas of their lives as a result of going to school, and although there were challenges with their program and with academic readiness (as mentioned above), the benefits of returning to school well outweighed the barriers. As one focus group member summed up “[returning to school] has been a really big step for me, and I’ve learned a lot and come a long way. I kind of felt like a write-off when I didn’t finish high school, but I was lucky to find a program and a place that allowed me to come back and do my schooling when I was more ready to do it [as an adult]. I wouldn’t pass this up for anything.”

Summary

This chapter has summarized the data gathered in this study, both from an anonymous on-line survey and from a subsequent focus group meeting. Qualitative, quantitative, and anecdotal information was gathered and summarized and presented by theme. The final chapter of this report will reflect on these results and their implications as related to the research topic and with regard to future study possibilities.

Chapter 5

This chapter will discuss the findings that were presented in the previous chapter and how these findings align with the questions put forth by this study. Connections will be made between the data collected and the current literature as reviewed in Chapter 2. In addition, the limitations of this study will be reviewed, as well as the implications of its findings to post-secondary education, and subsequent suggestions for future research.

Regarding Participant Characteristics

As suggested by Lewin (2005), the ideal survey sample size is 20-50 participants. Although I had aimed for 40-60 participants, obtaining input from 36 participants in this anonymous survey was ultimately ideal as it not only met Lewin's suggested criteria but it suggests a successful recruitment based on the limited amount of time that these participants have in their day-to-day lives. As many of the survey and focus group participants clearly stated, their time is limited and thus very precious, and therefore it is to be considered a major success that three dozen students found a moment to share their thoughts and experiences in the on-line survey. Additionally, the three focus group members made for an ideal small-group discussion size and I believe that good data were retrieved from the discussions, which in turn helped to clarify and validate the results that were obtained in the anonymous survey.

Information gathered in the survey indicated that, as hoped, the majority of respondents (86%) had not graduated from high school. This number indicates that the population of non-traditional students is indeed a reality and that adult learners do return to school, as made evident by the results indicated regarding participants' age of

completing a high school degree (see Figure 2).

It was also encouraging to discover that most participants had not considered dropping out, despite the obvious pressures and challenges that exist for them. This indicates that many students from this study find the existing programs to be a good fit, and feel that their challenges are being met, for the most part. A couple of participants commented on their increased maturity as a reason for their perseverance although others cited post-secondary supports that were helpful, including the upgrading courses, the free programs, and the self-paced features.

Regarding Access to Programs

According to the data collected, the majority of respondents (38%) had gained access to post-secondary programs by way of the College Prep Program, and nearly the same number (35%) indicated that the Employment Training Program was their initial program at their college. The fact that many survey respondents (31%) selected 'Programs' as their reason to enrol at the institution in this study indicates that program offerings exist that are in line with the needs of non-traditional students.

Students also indicated that 'Program Cost' was of major importance to them (44%), which was an overwhelming theme across the data in this study and indicates that, currently, programs exist at a cost that appeals to students. The recent news of program funding cuts, and subsequent increases in tuition, are clearly on the minds of students, as will be discussed below.

It was surprising to discover how students had first gained knowledge of the programs offered for non-traditional students (see Figure 5). The majority of students (39%) cited 'Word of mouth' whereas I had anticipated a higher response rate for

'Advertisement' or 'Academic Advisor.' However, 'word of mouth' indicates that the host college in this study has a good reputation and that adult and non-traditional learners are gaining confidence in approaching others to talk about post-secondary options. This is encouraging, as it may indicate that greater acceptance exists for this demographic, and that non-traditional students are feeling more comfortable with their situation to the point of seeking out options through others.

I was interested in the list that survey participants offered by way of their entries in the text field regarding other sources of information about available programs. These sources, including the Bridges for Women society and community partners, indicate that these outreach programs are effective sources of information for prospective students. Similarly, students appear to gather information via the Internet and the college website, which, in this digital age, are arguably powerful source of information for many individuals. Academic advisors (chosen by 21% of participants) and high school counsellors (chosen by 9% of participants) are still valuable sources of information and may play a larger role in students' subsequent contacts to the college after prospective students have made that initial step in investigating their options as non-traditional learners. The fact that participants in this study specified that these options were sources of information indicates the need to continue offering information by way of advisors and counsellors. The option chosen the least as a source of information was 'advertisement' which may indicate that the method or the amount of advertising for programs geared towards non-traditional students may be, at this time, ineffective.

Regarding Barriers

Data gathered regarding participants' academic concerns was on par with information suggested by the current literature, as discussed in Chapter 2. Participants in this study indicated that academic concerns centred on being able to keep up and fitting in in the classrooms. Study skills, repeating courses in weak subject areas, and knowing what courses to take were cited as sources of concern. Additionally, participants commented on fears related to having academic weaknesses exposed and perhaps not passing classes. This might translate to a reluctance to ask for help, as one focus group participant suggested.

These academic concerns are similar to those suggested by Kazis et al. (2007), Finnie et al. (2010), and Ritt (2008) as discussed in Chapter 2. Additionally, Hardin's research in 2008 suggests that a gap in time between high school and post-secondary studies may result in non-traditional learners' skills being out of date and out of practice, which may hamper academic progress or feelings of confidence in a learning situation. Data gathered from the survey participants and the focus group members seems to agree with this phenomenon, and indicates a need for more academic support for adult and non-traditional students.

In accordance with current literature, non-academic concerns as cited by all of this study's participants centred on finances. Nearly half (44%) of all survey respondents indicated that the cost of education was of major concern to them, suggesting that more support is needed in this key area, as argued by Kirby et al. (2009) and Ritt (2008). Focus group members' concerns regarding budget cuts and subsequent tuition increases no doubt represent the concerns of many, and funding cuts may indeed limit the ability of

students to attend post-secondary programs, as was mentioned in the focus group interviews. Since 'program cost' was also cited as a major reason as to why this study's participants chose to enrol at this institution, a rise in tuition may have dire consequences for post-secondary enrolment rates as well as the fact that students may be forced to look elsewhere for programs, or may, unfortunately, not be able to afford to attend post-secondary studies.

As reported in current literature, 'time' is also a major barrier as indicated in much of the anecdotal evidence collected from this study's focus group meetings. Balancing school, family, work and homework is a struggle many students face and is a cause of major concern, as discussed by Cupp (1991). It was interesting and also disheartening to hear the anxiety in one focus group member's comments regarding the struggle between wanting to return to school to make life better for her children, and yet feeling the stress and disappointment of not having time to spend with those children. This clearly illustrates the paradoxical nature of some non-traditional learners' experiences of returning to school: the desire and need is there, and yet there is little time available to devote to schooling.

In keeping with the data suggested by literature regarding adults in education, survey and focus group members commented on feeling out of place as an older student. There was mention of the feelings of disconnect with the younger college atmosphere, and how some students felt that they were treated differently by younger students and by faculty members, as cautioned by Merriam & Caffarella (1991). However, it was encouraging to hear that such a situation was not as prevalent as it could be, that some participants felt increasingly comfortable with classroom demographics, and that

instructors were found to be empathetic and caring towards adult students' needs. This indicates that many of the staff members at this western Canadian college seem to be sensitive to the needs of their diverse classroom population and that the institution as a whole is communicating an environment of acceptance towards non-traditional students. Likewise, it was encouraging to hear from participants that they felt that their post-secondary institution of choice was inclusive and safe, that there was good information from Academic Advisors, and that administrative duties could be performed on line (as suggested by Frey, 2007).

Other barriers, as indicated by this study's participants, included issues over the cost of parking, institutional fees, and the need for a greater college budget. These three topics alone relate to participants' concerns as described above regarding the financial costs of returning to school. Students are clearly aware of and frustrated by the fees associated with attending a post-secondary institution, and this is no doubt related to the comments gathered in other areas of the study related to fears of tuition increases and managing the stress that comes with having to work while going to school in order to live within a balanced personal budget.

Regarding Supports

Sources of support as indicated by participants include those at the personal level and at the institutional level. Participants who cited personal sources of support included comments about their own willingness to work hard or their increased maturity as adult learners, as well as the support of friends or family. These data are similar to results published by Askham (2008) in that adults are more likely to find personal support outside of a post-secondary institution and that this support through family and friends is

vital. The fact that 'family and friends' was the second most frequently chosen option as a source of support (at 19%) indicates that non-traditional and adult learners do seek out these areas of support.

Sources of support at the institutional level included empathetic teachers and supportive faculty that helped students to feel that they belonged and that instructors were aware of their needs as non-traditional learners. Indeed, 'instructor support' was the most frequently chosen source of support (at 24%) during challenging times, which indicates that teaching faculty at this college has, for the most part, an awareness of the needs of adult and non-traditional learners. Students commented that speaking with teachers was helpful and that instructors are approachable and supportive. Additionally, programs such as course upgrading were reported to be helpful as a way to re-integrate adult and non-traditional learners back to the classroom and increase their confidence as they embark on a new educational path. This kind of feedback regarding faculty and programming suggests that an institution currently exists that is operating with the adult learner in mind, as suggested by Cupp (1991), Merriam & Caffarella (1991), and Kenner & Weinerman (2011).

It was interesting to note that 13% of participants in this study commented on 'other students' as a source of support, and that focus group members also mentioned the favourable interactions they had had with other students as a way to feel less isolated and reduce worry over personal situations. However, most participants (42%) had chosen 'not applicable' with regard to having accessed student support networks at their college and again the majority (at 50%) indicated that a future program might not be useful for them (by rating the option as a '1' or a '2'). This is despite the fact that 27% of survey

respondents indicated that they had directly experienced student support groups and rated them as a '5' on the 5-point scale. This contradictory evidence suggests that students feel the desire to talk with others and to share stories, but do not currently seek it out, and do not envision a formal support network being of use to them in the future. Perhaps, as focus group participants indicated, adult and non-traditional students do not feel that they have the time to access such a support network on top of their other life responsibilities, despite seeing the value that such a group might bring to their lives and success as a student.

These results agree with research suggested by Hardin (2008), Kenner & Weinerman (2011), and Cupp (1991) who all indicate that adult and non-traditional learners can become isolated from the college learning community due to a reduced social network, compared to traditional students. Thus non-traditional and adult learners may need more support with interacting with others of similar interests and life situations, as the research shows that those involved in campus life are more likely to persist (cited in Hardin, 2008, and in Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Focus group members' comments and 53% of survey respondents indicated that the use of group work in classes was of great importance to them. These results are not surprising, given the research suggested by Conti (1985), Fenwick (2001), and McGrath (2009) with regard to collaborative learning styles and problem-centred classroom tasks. Indeed, Conti (1985) draws connections between teaching style and student achievement, which was indirectly supported by this study's participants' comments with regard to feeling that instructors supported learners' needs and that group-style lesson formats resulted in students feeling an increased sense of confidence and thus participation rates.

According to survey results, 57% of participants rated 'Student Help Centres' as a '4' or a '5' due to direct experience, and only 20% of respondents had chosen 'not applicable' for this source of support. This indicates that students are utilizing the support at their host college's Help Centres and have a need for them, as noted earlier with regard to participants' academic concerns stemming from a return to the classroom, although Help Centres are not often cited as a main source of support during challenging times (as made evident in Figure 7). However, given the data mentioned earlier with regard to the lack of time felt by many adults and non-traditional students in this study, it is impressive that so many students find the time to access help at the Student Help Centres. And in doing so, their actions make it obvious that there is a need for student help centres and study skills instruction, and this need is supported in the current literature (Finnie et al., 2010; Kazis et al., 2007).

The subject of 'counselling' as a source of support yielded contradictory data, and part of that could be as a result of unclear wording in the survey questions. Question 10 asked survey respondents to comment on how they would rate the importance to their success of 'career and life planning' due to direct experience. 51% of respondents rated this support service as a '5' on the 5-point scale and only 9% rated it as 'not applicable.' However, question 12 asked survey participants to indicate how important certain factors were in helping them to decide to continue with their education during challenging times, and in this question 'academic, career, or life counselling' was chosen by only 5% of respondents. This could indicate that while counselling is seen as important, it does not play a key role in supporting students during challenging times, which seems counter-productive to its function. However, it could also mean that while I meant the two

options to be synonymous, participants may not have considered 'career and life planning' to equate to 'academic, career or life counselling' and thus may not have answered clearly. Regrettably, I did not take the time to clarify this issue with focus group members and thus am left with ambiguous data in this area.

This is unfortunate, seeing as data previously reported in this chapter indicated that this study's participants have felt anxiety over their academic paths and their program courses, and thus might find counselling to be of great value. This result, despite not being clear in my study, would support the current literature as reported by Simpson (2005), Hardin (2008), Kazis et al., (2007), and Compton et al., (2006) who write that adult and non-traditional students need more support to assist with transitions in all realms.

College outreach and financing information were both rated highly by students who had direct experiences with these institutional support sources, indicating that those realms are congruent with servicing adult and non-traditional learners. Similarly, 'technology' received good ratings from those participants in this study's survey who had experienced it directly, as no participant rated technology below a '3.'

Interestingly, despite earlier comments about the need for more flexibility and course scheduling options, most students (44%) rated this area as a '5' with only 21% of survey participants giving this topic a rating below '3' (see Figure 8) indicating general satisfaction with current program options. Thus, contrary to anecdotal data gathered from focus group participants, there does exist a post-secondary institution that seems to be offering students adequate program options and course scheduling, including course times (day, evening, and weekend options), space in classes, self-paced options, and

mode of delivery (such as in-person or on-line). Such a 'menu' of options, according to Kazis et al. (2007) is important to meet the needs of adult learners.

Regarding Participants' Recommendations

A frequently cited recommendation from study participants involved finances. Many students called for increased funding for students or a larger college budget, which is not surprising given students' concerns regarding finances as demonstrated by this study's data and in other current research. Additionally, students commented on the need for affordable child care on campus, reflecting on the unique needs of non-traditional and adult learners who struggle to balance school and family life. Although this topic requires more research, the need for affordable day care options on site does exist.

Many of the proposed recommendations from this study's data indicate that participants desire more support from the institution. For example, student participants commented with regard to an increased need for liaison with community employers, either through co-op placements or by way of employment fairs, indicating a desire to partner with employers at an early stage as a way to build relations and maintain motivation as a learner.

Students also commented on the need for an increase in career counselling and the establishment of orientation sessions to help students adjust to life as a learner. Orientation sessions were rated as a '4' or a '5' by 56% of survey respondents (see Figure 9), despite the fact that 26% of respondents indicated it was valued as a '1' for them. This indicates that students feel a need for more information as to the services offered at the college and the supports that are available, as was also noted during focus group discussions. Students commented on the need for more frequent reminders of services

available, library use and research instruction, campus tours, and orientations to help centres.

In addition, despite the clearly divided results regarding 'regular appointments with academic advisors' (see Figure 9), there does exist a group of students that see value in this service. And for those participants who rated it as an unlikely source of support and information, perhaps a focus group member summed up all of their views by succinctly stating that “sometimes you don't know what you're missing.” This indicates, then, that having regular check-ins with academic advisors might be advantageous to most students, including to those who may not have considered this as a valuable source of support.

Not surprisingly, given the results discussed earlier in this chapter, study respondents were very much in favour of recommending group work as an effective means of delivering information in the classroom, as well as the ability for students to start, stop, or pause their programs without penalty. However it was a surprise that 'study skills classes' was not as highly recommended (see Figure 9) as predicted, given the data reported earlier in this chapter. Participants commented on the value of upgrade classes as a way to hone study skills before classes increased in difficulty, and research indicates the need for more support for adult and non-traditional learners who return to the classroom (Finnie et al., 2010; Kazis et al., 2007; Rogers, 2002).

'Student support/mentoring system' also received less-than-favourable results from the majority of survey respondents despite earlier anecdotal evidence that indicates students' need for such a supportive network. However, as commented on earlier, the time limitations of this student demographic may be the reason why such a student

network is not chosen as a viable source of support for adults and non-traditional learners.

Limitations

It was very advantageous for me to be able to meet with three of the survey participants to form the focus group interviews, although I was disappointed with the low number of participants that volunteered to take part in this valuable activity. An additional three or four participants would have been ideal, with the thought of scheduling more than one small-group meeting in order to facilitate more discussion. Speaking in person with the participants provided invaluable information, and helped me to realize that two of my survey questions were unclear and that this may have affected results. I was partially able to clarify responses based on focus group members' comments, however I would have liked the opportunity to clarify the wording of the questions before the submission of the questionnaire. For this reason, it would have been advantageous to recruit volunteers for a focus group session during the creation of the survey, to then administer the anonymous survey, and then to meet with either the same focus group members or additional volunteers in order to confirm data and triangulate results.

Another area of concern for me as I reviewed the survey results was the suggested evidence that at least one participant consistently did not respond to the longer survey questions in which participants read and voted on several support options (questions 10 and 13). While it could be coincidence that at least one person did not respond to each item and in fact it might have been a few different people, I am more inclined to think that perhaps these questions were too long or too wordy for some participants to respond

to. Perhaps this is where I would have benefited from having a small focus group review the proposed questions for the purpose of providing feedback, such as the length of the question or the ease of understanding what was being asked of participants. Fortunately the results of these two lengthy questions did yield appropriate data, but the message to me as a researcher remains in that I must be more cognisant of my audience and shape my questions appropriately.

Regardless of these challenges, the goal of this study was not to provide generalized data, as the uniqueness of my research site is in itself a limiting factor. However, the data provided here in accordance with the current literature suggests that the needs and experiences of adult and non-traditional learners may not be unique to the institution in this study and that the barriers of finances and time transcend geography. Indeed, the findings of this research confirm that barriers for adult and non-traditional learners do still exist, as confirmed by this study's research and as supported by current literature.

Implications

Given the data gathered in this survey and in light of the recommendations made by both the study participants and the authors of the current literature, the following ideas have come forward as possibilities for improving the educational experiences and success rates of adults and non-traditional learners:

- Offer orientation sessions for new students. This could either be as part of a student's first on-campus class, or worked into course programs at periodic intervals. Topics could include reviewing support networks available to students, such as the Help Centres, Academic Advising, Counselling Centre, student library

and research help desk, and others.

- Offer frequent reminders to students of the supports available. As one focus group member stated, “sometimes you don't know what you're missing.” Periodic reminders could consist of in-class presentations by Help Centre instructors, Academic Advisors, Career Counsellors, or former students who can all share a perspective on the sources of help available to students. Doing this regularly and repeatedly might find success with reaching more students and also by reminding them what supports are available as students may be more receptive to certain pieces of information depending on the class that they are in. Inviting former students to attend initial classes could help answer the need for a student support network while also avoiding the issue of the lack of time for some students to seek this out independently. Former students could be paired up with a newly-registered student (if desired) so that the newer student could have someone to contact if the need be.
- Offer study skills programs frequently and (where possible) free of charge. Adult learning theory indicates that returning students will need explicit instruction regarding study skills and more support during their transition to a learning environment, especially at the start of their program (Finnie et al., 2010; Twigg, 2004). The desire for such programs was mentioned by students, although there were mixed results as to whether students would seek out such supports. Thus it is recommended that post-secondary institutions look into multiple delivery options of study skills, including offering regular explicit instructions in classes which would allow for immediate practice of materials. Currently the college in

this study does offer a Pre-enrolment Class as a separate entity; perhaps this curriculum could also be offered in modules over the duration of a class for those students who need the learning but do not have time or money for a separate course.

- Create or make more public a directory of resources. For students who need more information regarding financial support, child care, personal and spiritual counselling, or career counselling, perhaps it would be useful to provide a directory of resources (both on campus and off), as suggested by Hardin (2008) and Compton et al. (2006) as a way to ease students' transitions to post-secondary environments and the accompanying stress that the balancing of many commitments brings.
- Encourage instructors to facilitate group work. Not only does group work answer the need of students for social and emotional development as adult learners, but it also is in line with recommendations from current literature with regard to adult learning theory and practical application of this learning environment in the workplace (McGrath, 2009; Conti, 1985; Fenwick, 2001). Additionally, involvement in groups may encourage adults to form closer bonds with classmates and improve chances of integration, which has been shown to increase success (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).
- Professional development for institution staff. Training should be offered to faculty regularly to keep abreast of adult learning theory and to offer instructors a chance to share with their colleagues the practices and activities that they have found to be successful with adult and non-traditional learners.

- Offer multiple programming options (including scheduling in days, evenings, weekends and throughout the calendar year; space in classes; and mode of delivery including on-line courses). Where possible, continue to offer reduced fee courses in order to support returning learners. Self-paced options are of importance to students, and continuing this option would have clear benefits for adult and non-traditional students.
- Increase funding. Where possible, make more funding available to allow for additional programs to be developed or scheduled, and offer increasing financing options for students including bursaries. More research is needed in this area.
- Career Fairs or Employment Expos. While such programs may require extensive work and planning, they would no doubt bring benefits to students by way of motivation and possible career partnerships. Additionally, it would also allow a post-secondary institution to showcase its programs and student talent to prospective employers and community investors, who may in turn elect to support college programs through financial or other means.
- Involve family members. Perhaps offer periodic open house events to encourage students to bring their families to the college for tours and to see where their loved one is investing time and energy. This may help to bridge the divide that some students may feel between the different aspects of their lives, and may also build understanding in family members as to the level of commitment needed for the student.
- Increase advertising. Perhaps alternate forms of advertising (beyond print) could be explored more frequently and an advertising program could include former

students' stories so as to appeal to prospective students on a personal level, almost as a mimic to the 'word of mouth' method of initial information favoured by students in this study.

Further Research

As mentioned earlier, the results gathered and presented in this study offer a view into the specific experiences of adult and non-traditional learners at one community college in western Canada. However, it is hoped that some of the data collected here represent the struggles felt by other non-traditional students, and thus the results could be generally applied to other post-secondary institutions and students with caution.

Additionally, while the suggestions discussed above have been made with the thought of directly supporting the educational endeavours of adults and non-traditional students, many of the suggestions could benefit other demographics at the college (such as the orientation programs, the employment expos, and the reminders of support systems).

Non-traditional and adult learners represent a growing population at post-secondary institutions and thus this study offers opportunity for further research. For example, an increase in funding for students and for institutions is a clear need as made evident by the data collected in this study, although more detailed results are needed before recommendations can be made. Similarly, an increase in child care options for these non-traditional students is needed, but this study has not provided sufficient data so as to make recommendations on this topic. Independent of these two issues, regular review of adult and non-traditional student programs is necessary in order to ensure that institutions are offering adequate programs and supports for these students.

Final Conclusions

The qualitative, quantitative, and anecdotal results of this research study confirm the need for more support for non-traditional students at the post-secondary level. As indicated by study results and in current literature, non-traditional students and adult learners are handling enormous challenges in their endeavours to enrol and succeed in post-secondary programs.

The goal of this study was to gather feedback from students who had not achieved a high school diploma and to investigate the barriers and supports experienced by these learners during their return to an academic setting. The data gathered from participants in this study suggests that while supports and programs do exist at the post-secondary level, there are areas in which changes or improvements could result in more support for this student demographic. As Cupp (1991) states, “identification of the factors which are perceived as barriers to the goals of education can assist educators and administrators in developing strategies and programs which enhance the educational experiences for the adult student” (p. 23). Indeed, it is the hope of this researcher that opportunities continue to exist for non-traditional and adult students in post-secondary settings and that services and programs are continuously reviewed and improved in order to better support non-traditional learners as they navigate barriers to find their path on their educational journey.

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Appendix A

On-line Survey Questions and Responses

Appendix A

Survey questions and quantitative responses from 36 respondents during October, 2011.

1. Why did you choose to register at [this college] as opposed to other institutions? (Choose all that apply).

Response	Frequency	Percent
Location	3	8%
Programs	12	31%
Program Cost	17	44%
Reputation	3	8%
Other	4	10%
Total responses	39	

2. Did you graduate from high school?

Response	Frequency	Percent
No	31	86%
Yes	5	14%
Total responses	36	

3. If you answered yes to #2, how old were you when you received your high school graduation certificate?

[responses varied]

4. Please indicate your method of access or your initial program at [this college]. (Choose all that apply)

Response	Frequency	Percent
College Prep Program	15	38%
Foundations Classes	5	13%
Direct program entry	2	5%
B.E.S.T. Program	2	5%
Employment Training Program	14	35%
Other	2	5%
Total responses	40	

5. How did you know that these programs existed? (Choose all that apply)

Response	Frequency	Percent
High School Counsellor	3	9%
[college] Academic Advisor	7	21%
Word of mouth/friend/relative	13	39%
Advertisement	2	6%
Other	8	24%
Total responses	33	

6. If you are a returning learner or a mature student, what were your biggest academic-related concerns about returning to school?

[responses varied]

7. Considering your answer to #6, what supports or assistance did the college offer that made your return to classroom learning easier, if any?

[responses varied]

8. What additional supports, assistance, or programs would be helpful or contribute to your academic success? Please explain.

[responses varied]

9. What were your biggest non-academic concerns regarding a return to school? (Choose all that apply)

Response	Frequency	Percent
Financial	20	44%
Social	5	22%
Personal	12	27%
Other	8	18%
Total responses	45	

10. Please rate the importance to your success of the following supports/ programs at [this college] that you have experienced directly. Rate each from 1 to 5, with 1 being the least important or helpful and 5 being the most important or helpful. General comments would be very appreciated.

Response	N/A	%	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	5	%	Total	No respon se
College Outreach (including information and guidance on how to apply and register for classes)	2	6%	3	9%	2	6%	5	15%	7	21%	15	44%	34	2
Help with career and life planning	3	9%	2	6%	3	9%	3	9%	6	17%	18	51%	35	1
Financing information and/or options	3	10%	1	3%	1	3%	4	13%	8	26%	14	45%	31	5
Assessment of your academic abilities and needs	1	3%	5	14%	2	6%	4	11%	13	37%	10	29%	35	1
Clear program information (such as pre-requisites you need, your academic path to reach your goals, etc.)	1	3%	0	0%	5	14%	8	23%	9	26%	12	34%	35	1
Student Help Centres	7	20%	2	6%	3	9%	3	9%	8	23%	12	34%	35	1
Student support networks (such as mentoring programs)	14	42%	0	0%	4	12%	4	12%	2	6%	9	27%	33	3
Technology	9	28%	0	0%	0	0%	9	28%	2	6%	12	38%	32	4

11. Have you felt a desire to drop out? Why?

[responses varied]

12. During challenging times, what has helped or supported you in deciding to continue with your education? (Choose all that apply. General comments below would be very appreciated.)

Response	Frequency	Percent
Student Support Networks (such as mentoring or buddy programs)	3	3%
Student Help Centres	7	6%
Academic, career or life counselling	6	5%
Support from an instructor	27	24%
Program design (course flexibility for times/locations/formats)	19	17%
Teaching methods	12	11%
Other students in the program	15	13%
Family support or support from friends	21	19%
Other	3	3%
Total responses	113	

13. Some programs that have been useful for learners are listed below. Please indicate if they would be useful for you by rating them on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not very useful' to 5 being 'very useful.'

Response	1	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	5	%	Total	No response
Student support network or mentoring system	6	18%	11	32%	5	15%	7	21%	5	16%	34	2
Orientation sessions to help students become familiar with the college and the culture and policies	9	26%	3	9%	3	9%	2	6%	17	50%	34	2
Study skills classes	8	23%	3	9%	5	14%	8	23%	11	31%	35	1
Regular appointments with an Academic Advisor to check progress, help you set goals, etc.	11	31%	4	11%	2	6%	5	14%	13	37%	35	1
Group work in classes	4	12%	2	6%	3	9%	7	21%	18	53%	34	2
Ability to start, stop, or pause a program at various points	5	16%	0	0%	7	22%	2	6%	18	56%	32	4

14. Do you feel that there have been policies, barriers, or obstacles that have increased your level of frustration or stress or limited your academic success at post-secondary education? Please explain.

[responses varied]

15. In summary, please describe any areas where you feel the college might consider making adjustments or modifications that could result in a more supportive environment for the success of returning learners or mature students.

[responses varied]