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Determined to Graduate: How Active and Enrolled Nontraditional College Students Define Persistence and Success in an Accelerated Degree-Completion Program

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed method study was to discover how active and enrolled nontraditional college students (NTSs), who are generally described as being over 24 years of age, defined persistence and success in an accelerated degree-completion program at a northeast liberal arts college. Additionally, this study sought the students' experiences of the institution's specific accelerated degree programs (ADP) and how it addressed the barriers the NTSs encountered. The methodology for this mixed method study involved data collection through a survey of 48 descriptive questions with opportunities for additional comments from the participants through 10 open-ended questions. The quantitative analysis was conducted with SPSS. The qualitative data received from the open-ended questions were analyzed with NVivo software, and the data received as comments were coded into smaller categories utilizing NVivo codes. The findings from the open-ended questions resulted in the themes, which emerged from the data. This study exposed how and why the accelerated degree-completion format is ideal for the nontraditional student. The students' perspectives and experiences of the ADP at the study site reflected their satisfaction and progress toward degree completion while balancing contrasting responsibilities. By understanding the needs and motivation of NTSs and how an accelerated degree-completion program can help them finish their degree, colleges and universities could attract, retain, and graduate self-motivated adult learners who are seeking degree completion.

Document Type

Dissertation

Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department

Executive Leadership

First Supervisor

Janice Kelly

Second Supervisor

Bil Leipold

Subject Categories

Education

Determined to Graduate: How Active and Enrolled Nontraditional College Students
Define Persistence and Success in an Accelerated Degree-Completion Program

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Janice Kelly

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

May 2019

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Dedication

As I reflect on my journey through life and how many wonderful people have been a part of this amazing experience a proverb comes mind, “It takes a village.” I dedicate this body of work to the loving villagers who have encouraged, supported, and believed in me through all phases of my doctoral journey. So many of you have called “Dr. Nereida Quiles-Wasserman” into being! These villagers are my loving family, friends, colleagues, who have encouraged, supported, and believed in me through all phases of my doctoral journey. However, my husband, David J. Wasserman, is my biggest cheerleader, and he inspired me to do this work. He has always been, and continues to be, the one who sees more in me than I do.

I cannot imagine this glorious journey without the love and support of my family. My dear mother, Flora Cortes-Quiles, and father, Pedro Monserrat Quiles, my angels in heaven, taught me to persevere—regardless of the circumstances. As far back as I can remember, our parents told us to always stay close to our family and to always be there for each other. I am blessed with four brothers, Pedro, Gilbert, David, and Albert. Not only are they my closest family members, they are my friends. Blessings flourish in my life because their wives have become my sisters and their children, my dear nieces and nephews, shower me with unconditional love. I especially thank my sister-in-law, Esther, and brother, Gilbert, for planting the college seed in me so many years ago when I did not think it was possible as a teen wife and mother. However, that seed, once planted and

nurtured over the years, has grown into a magnificent, strong, and regal redwood tree firmly rooted on solid ground.

To my dear daughters, Selene and Lely, I thank you for giving me a purpose beyond my wildest dreams as your mom. It was a joy growing up with you, nurturing you, and watching you grow into the beautiful, independent, and strong women you are today. I am grateful you have freely embraced the love of learning I so wanted you to have. Thank you for giving me precious grandchildren to love and spoil. I cannot imagine my life without Liana, my sunshine and birthday angel, and Jacob, a towering model of strength. I am also blessed with two new granddaughters, Brianna, and Dani!

Friends and in-laws are angels, too, and they have fed me, cheered me on, and simply cared. Thank you, Dr. Steve Chichetti, Dr. Stephen Buckley, Ann Marie, Mike, and Debbie, along with Dr. Judith Riggs and fellow cohort friend, thank you for everything! Armand DiCarlo, thank you, and Landmark Education Worldwide, for taking a stand for my greatness. Jenny Saa-Tomala, thank you for your wisdom and kindness. Thank you, Dr. Vance Zemon, Henry Tomala, Ellen and Ken Festa, Judy and Bob Wilson, Maria Nazario, and Cecie Andaluz. Your love and support are precious.

Educators have a special place in my heart, and these folks have been a constant in my life over multiple decades beginning with my undergraduate studies. Thank you, Doc, more formally known as Dr. Levinson, and muchas gracias Dr. Navarro, for encouraging me to excel beyond the stereotypical norm of Hispanic American, teen mothers.

An extra special thanks to my colleagues at Concordia College. When I started working at Concordia as I transitioned from the corporate sector 11 years ago, I had no

idea that Concordia would become an incubator, a cocoon, that would nurture my personal and academic growth while developing a new career in academia, which has evolved into a calling. Concordia is the Latin word for harmony, and life here has been harmonious for my heart and soul. There are incredibly special people at Concordia who genuinely care; therefore, I extend an extra special thank you to Dr. Sherry Fraser, another fellow St. John Fisher classmate and a great mentor, who always had faith in me. I extend deep gratitude to Dr. Susan Krauss; Dr. Mandana Nakhai; Dr. Stephanie Squires; Dr. Susan Apold; Dr. Bill Salva; Rev. Dr. John Nunes; Susan Crane; Amy Heath; Billy Perrenod; Terry Vidal; Arlene Torres, Esq.; Joan Adams; Evelyn Cea; Jenifer Jules; and so many more! I thank all of you for also calling Dr. Quiles-Wasserman into being. Please know that your support and encouragement have been priceless!

Naturally, I must thank my chair, Dr. Janice Kelly, for your unending enthusiasm and cheerful outlook, regardless of what was happening around us. Your attitude was contagious and appreciated. Dr. Bil Leipold, thank you for your contribution and smile.

Finally, I dedicate this study to the students of the accelerated degree programs (ADP) who candidly shared their college degree completion journey as nontraditional college students. You inspired me to continue my journey as a fellow nontraditional college student, and I am forever grateful to you. May you have continued success in all you choose to pursue. Thank you for reminding me of what I shared with you when we first met, especially when I needed to hear it most, “Yes, we can!” and “We all have the same 24 hours, and what we do with them is our choice!” God bless you all!

Biographical Sketch

Nereida Quiles-Wasserman is the Director of Institutional Research, Assessment and Compliance and the Title IX Coordinator at Concordia College New York. She also serves as an Assistant Professor in the Business and English departments at Concordia. Ms. Quiles-Wasserman had a successful career in the business sector for two decades before transitioning to a calling in academia just as she completed her undergraduate degree. She attended Lehman College CUNY, initially full-time, but mostly as a part-time student, while working full time and raising two daughters, and she graduated in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Business Administration degree. As she completed the final course of her undergraduate degree, she enrolled at Mercy College School of Business and graduated in 2009 with a Master of Science in Business Leadership degree. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2012 and began doctoral studies in the Executive Leadership program. Ms. Quiles-Wasserman pursued her research in How Active and Enrolled Nontraditional College Students Define Persistence and Success in an Accelerated Degree-Completion Program under the direction of Dr. Janice Kelly and Dr. Bil Leipold and received the doctoral degree in 2019.

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed method study was to discover how active and enrolled nontraditional college students (NTSs), who are generally described as being over 24 years of age, defined persistence and success in an accelerated degree-completion program at a northeast liberal arts college. Additionally, this study sought the students' experiences of the institution's specific accelerated degree programs (ADP) and how it addressed the barriers the NTSs encountered.

The methodology for this mixed method study involved data collection through a survey of 48 descriptive questions with opportunities for additional comments from the participants through 10 open-ended questions. The quantitative analysis was conducted with SPSS. The qualitative data received from the open-ended questions were analyzed with NVivo software, and the data received as comments were coded into smaller categories utilizing NVivo codes. The findings from the open-ended questions resulted in the themes, which emerged from the data.

This study exposed how and why the accelerated degree-completion format is ideal for the nontraditional student. The students' perspectives and experiences of the ADP at the study site reflected their satisfaction and progress toward degree completion while balancing contrasting responsibilities. By understanding the needs and motivation of NTSs and how an accelerated degree-completion program can help them finish their degree, colleges and universities could attract, retain, and graduate self-motivated adult learners who are seeking degree completion.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Concordia College New York for their support and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. I am eternally appreciative and honored to be a member of the Concordia Community and family. Thank you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This mixed method study uncovered how active, nontraditional student (NTS) adult learners, who were enrolled in an accelerated program for degree completion at a northeast liberal arts college, defined persistence, and success. The duration and delivery of accelerated coursework differs from traditional college courses. Accelerated courses are compressed into 4- to 6-week modules that meet once or twice a week, versus the traditional 16-week, multiple-days-a-week schedule (Wlodkowski, 2003a). The NTS is defined by one or a combination of attributes such as age, which is over the age of 24 years; financial independence; and he or she either did not attend college directly after high school or who has some or no college experience (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009a). This research study examined how students' individual attitudes and beliefs influenced their persistence and degree completion. This study also uncovered the students' experiences of the accelerated degree program (ADP) and it addressed barriers to their degree completion. The methodology for this mixed method study involved data collection through a survey of 48 descriptive questions with opportunities for additional comments from the participants through 10 open-ended questions.

Currently, the average college undergraduate is not the stereotypical high school graduate who is registered as a full-time student, typically does not have to work full time, nor has family responsibilities (NCES, 2009a). Nontraditional college students make up the majority of undergraduates enrolled in higher education, especially when the

term *nontraditional* is more broadly defined to include characteristics not typically associated with participation in college (Ross-Gordon, 2011). In 2002, the NCES published a report noting that when the term *nontraditional student* is defined to include any of the seven characteristics not commonly associated with participation in college, 73% of students in higher education could be regarded as NTSs (Choy, 2002b). Therefore, the bulk of college students today are older, more diverse, and have added work and family obligations to balance (Choy, 2002a; Horn & Carrol, 1996; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Recent research, supported by statistical data, is confidently stating that nontraditional college students, also referred to as *adult learners* or *adult students* throughout this study, are becoming the new traditional students, and they are an important majority on college campuses throughout the United States (Bell, 2012; Clark, 2012; Hess, 2011; Horn & Carrol, 1996; NCES, 2009a; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares, 2013).

The definition of an NTS has varied and evolved over the past three decades. In 1996, Horn and Carrol reported Bean and Metzner (1985) as the first to identify age, at 24 years or older, and part-time status, as the primary factors of an NTS (p. 486). However, in 1996, Horn and Carrol expanded the definition to include seven more characteristics not generally related with participation in college. This current study refers to Horn and Carrol's (1996) findings and the expanded definition of nontraditional students, which includes the presence of one or more of the following life situations: (a) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (b) attended college part time, (c) financially independent, (d) worked full time while enrolled in college, (e) had

dependents other than a spouse, (f) was a single parent, or (g) did not obtain a standard high school diploma and had a general equivalency diploma (GED).

The NCES (2012) reported that the percentage increase of the nontraditional college population for 2000-2009 was larger than the percentage increase in the number of students who were less than 24 years of age. Between 2000 and 2009, the enrollment of students under the age of 25 increased by 27%; however, enrollment of students aged 25 and over increased by 43% during the identical time frame. The NCES (2009b) stated this pattern is expected to continue for the next decade and projects a growth of 23% in enrollments of students 25 years of age and over from 2010 to 2019, compared to an increase of 9% of students under 25 years of age. Nontraditional college students seeking degree completion are a population that has steadily increased over the past 30 years, becoming an important part of the college student population, labor force, and job growth (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Horn & Carrol, 1996; NCES, 2002; Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stokes, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2003b).

This study uncovered how NTSs (adult learners), enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program at a northeast liberal arts college, defined persistence, and success. The students also disclosed their experiences of the specific ADP and how it addressed barriers to their degree completion. The theoretical framework used to gain insight on the NTS is based on adult learning theories derived from a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Three adult learning theories are reviewed and discussed: andragogy, transformative learning, and self-directed learning. The benefits of conducting this study for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers include creating or enhancing new curriculum; providing services; improving recruiting efforts; and

increasing enrollment, retention, and completion rates (Carnevale et al., 2010; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2011).

Problem Statement

Significant and consistently growing population. Statistics show how millions of NTSs seeking degree completion has increased enrollment in colleges consistently and significantly over the past three decades (NCES, 2009b; Choy, 2003b; Horn & Carrol, 1996; Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003b). Subsequently, NTSs constitute the bulk of undergraduates enrolled in higher education across the United States, especially when the term nontraditional is more broadly defined to include characteristics not typically associated with participation in college (Choy, 2002b). NTSs enroll while working full time, and they are considered financially independent for the purposes of determining financial aid eligibility. Many have dependents other than a spouse, and many are single parents. Other NTSs do not have a high school diploma (Choy, 2002b; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Horn & Carol, 1996; Wlodkowski, 2003b). Consequently, numerous contemporary college students are older, more diverse, and have work and family obligations to balance, and many have not graduated with a college degree (Choy, 2002b; Horn & Carrol, 1996; Ross-Gordon, 2011). However, NTSs are returning to college in record numbers to finish what they started, to fulfill a lifetime goal, to advance their careers, or for any combination of these reasons.

Concerns and issues of NTSs. Research about nontraditional college students reveals various issues and concerns that serve as barriers to success, which include (a) lack of academic preparedness; (b) past academic failures); (c) the role of multiple

stress factors on degree completion, such as financial concerns; (d) a lack of access to financial resources; (e) the adult learning style differs from traditional teaching methods; (f) coping with conflicting demands of their time; (g) competing responsibilities; (h) full-time employment; and (i) lack of self-confidence due to delayed enrollment in postsecondary education (Choy, 2002b; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Horn & Carrol, 1996; May & Akin, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2005). NTSs may need additional support and resources to achieve successful degree completion (Horn & Carrol, 1996; Wlodkowski & Mauldin, 2002). However, access to academic student services, such as counseling and library access, are geared toward traditional students (May & Akin, 1998; Wlodkowski & Mauldin, 2002).). As a result, NTS motivation and expectation for degree attainment is affected (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2005). Nonetheless, degree completion by NTSs is growing, and in some instances, at a higher rate than traditional students, and this can be attributed to intrinsic motivation, persistence, learning-goal orientation, and full-time enrollment in accelerated degree programs (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Mezirow, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003a).

Economic impact. Today's workplace has evolved from an industrial environment to a high-tech, service-oriented, knowledge economy, and the need for this type of employee has increased (Carnevale et al., 2010; May & Akin, 1998; USDOE, 2007). Higher education is a bridge to a career in the knowledge economy for vast numbers of working adults and lifelong learning is a necessary ingredient in retraining for a position within the knowledge economy (Carnevale et al., 2010; Mooney, 1994). In

2007, the USDOE reported the Department of Labor's data indicated that 90% of the fastest growing jobs required some form of postsecondary education. The USDOE's *College Completion Tool Kit* (2011), a report directed to and a guide for U.S. governors, focuses on the role of a well-educated workforce, and increased levels of college completion, for a state's job-creation strategy. The report is part of a comprehensive approach for creating an action plan for higher education. The USDOE (2011) report states that the adult population who has some college but no degree should receive specific attention in a state's job-creation strategy because it is one of the quickest, most effective, and least expensive paths to increase the number of people with college degrees. Adult learners who experience academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Carnevale et al., 2010). For the United States to sustain leadership in the knowledge economy, it needs to ensure that Americans are prepared for high-value jobs as knowledge workers (Carnevale et al., 2010; Stokes, 2006). Stokes's (2006) research provides a succinct summary and analysis of the importance of the nontraditional college student to the American economy. He outlined the problem, suggested desired changes, and gave viable solutions. Carnevale et al. (2010) provided an in-depth report supporting Stokes's research with specific projections of where the jobs are located and where they will be through 2018 including the educational requirements for such jobs. In this respect, focus on nontraditional college students is integral to sustaining the health of the U.S. economy.

Mutual benefits. Colleges recognize and attempt to address the needs of the NTS population by offering flexible schedules, accelerated programs, online curriculum,

and tuition payment options (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2005). Despite college's efforts to meet existing and emerging needs, NTSs are more likely to leave college without earning a degree, compared to traditional students (Wlodkowski, 2003a). Consequently, learning about the characteristics of NTSs enrolled in an accelerated bachelor degree completion program is vital to attracting and meeting the needs of this type of student, while increasing enrollment, retention, and degree completion rates for this population (Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Stokes, 2006; USDOE, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003a; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001). Additionally, this study uncovered the NTSs' experiences of the accelerated degree program. Providing NTSs with programs and services identified as factors of success toward the completion of a college degree served to increase retention and graduation rates (Wlodkowski, 2003a).

Theoretical Rationale

As reported by Scott and Lewis (2012), Jinkens (2009) stated that while forming a theoretical foundation for investigating the attributes and perceptions of NTSs, especially students in accelerated degree-completion programs, this demographic is a moderately new area of research and, as a result, there are scarce studies and models related to the NTS in accelerated degree-completion types of programs. However, adult learning theory is one of the initial constructs that has been central in forming a foundation for research regarding NTSs (Scott & Lewis, 2012). Therefore, the theoretical framework used to inform this study was based on adult learning theories derived from a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Three adult learning theories are reviewed and discussed: andragogy, transformative learning, and self-directed learning.

Andragogy. Although the concept of andragogy as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 61) had been used sporadically since the 1830s and especially in Europe, Malcolm Knowles (1968) popularized the term in the United States (Cooke, 2010; Holyoake & Larson, 2009; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Smith, 2002). Smith (2002) and Merriam (2001) posited that Knowles (1968) was a pioneer in adult learning theory and developed the concept of andragogy into a theory by offering a new label and a new technology of adult learning to differentiate it from pre-adult education (Merriam, 2001; Smith, 2002). The European model of andragogy was contrasted with pedagogy, which is the art and science of helping children learn (Merriam, 2001). Knowles (1980) said that andragogy is distinct from traditional pedagogy, and it is based on central assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners, which are different from the conventions about child learners. In 2001 and 2002, respectively, Merriam and Smith reported that Knowles (1980) used six characteristics of adult learners to answer the question, “Who are adult learners?” The six characteristics of adult learners that Knowles identified are (a) they are autonomous and self-directed, (b) they have accumulated a foundation of experiences and knowledge, (c) they are goal oriented, (d) they are relevancy oriented, (e) they are practical, and (f) they have a need to be shown respect. In 2005, Holmes, Holton, and Swanson expanded on the prior assumptions and created a learning model that is part of a learning theory system (Holyoake & Larson, 2009). The learning model includes the adult learners’ (a) need to know, (b) self-concept and role of the learner’s experience, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) motivation. In this model, self-concept connects the maturity level a person experiences from dependency to independency (Scott &

Lewis, 2012). Andragogy became a uniting point for those trying to define the field of adult education as distinct from other areas of education (Merriam, 2001).

Mezirow's (1981) definition of andragogy is in alignment with Knowles's (1968) definition, and Mezirow stated that it is "an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners" (p. 21). This type of student knows the extent of the responsibilities needed to attend college.

Self-directed learning. Around the same period that Knowles (1968) presented andragogy to North American adult educators, self-directed learning (SDL) appeared as another model that helped define adult learners as different from children (Merriam, 2001). SDL is inherent to the assumptions of andragogy; however, it has also been studied from other points of view distinct from Knowles' (1968) theory (Bass, 2012). SDL "suggests that learners need to be in control of their learning" (Bass, 2012, p. 388). Bass also reported that Guglielmino (1977) defined SDL "as a composite of characteristics that create the probability that an individual can accomplish self-directed learning, thus implying that instructors create a learning environment that promotes SDL" (p. 388). Bass (2012) stated Guglielmino's definition of SDL that "leads to the idea that if schools create learning environments that encourage SDL, learners will also be transformed into lifelong learners" (Bass, 2012, p. 388).

Transformative learning. Mezirow (1981) stated that transformation theory is a model that consists of structures, elements, and processes of adult learning. The theory's assumptions are constructivist. A learner interprets his or her experience, which is vital to making meaning and therefore learning (Mezirow, 1981). At the core of the NTS is

perspective transformation, a term introduced by Mezirow, in 1978, as the result of a study about women participating in college reentry programs. The study revealed how breaking free of psychocultural assumptions and traditional stereotypical views of *proper* roles of women induced them to take action (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (1981) found the following:

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychocultural assumptions come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon this new understanding (p. 6).

NTSs have embraced perspective transformation as demonstrated by the dramatic and consistent increase of the NTS population over the past three decades (Merriam, 2001). Today's NTSs believe they can succeed in college and that they have the right to be there (Bass, 2012; Holyoake & Larson, 2009; Stokes, 2006; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this mixed method study was to discover how active and enrolled NTSs defined persistence and success in an accelerated degree-completion program at a northeast liberal arts college. Additionally, this study sought the students' experiences of the accelerated degree-completion program and how the institution's ADP addressed barriers the nontraditional students encountered.

Research Questions

Current research shows that NTSs are more likely to leave traditional college programs without earning a degree, compared to traditional students (Choy, 2002b; Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Stokes, 2006;). However, NTSs enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program, or who attended full time, have a higher rate of completion (Wlodkowski, 2003a; Wlodkowski et al., 2001).

The research questions that were used to lead to discovery in this study are:

1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?
2. What are the students' experiences of the study site's accelerated degree program (ADP)?
3. How does the study site's ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

Significance of the Study

The benefits of conducting this study for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers include (a) acquiring new data about NTSs in accelerated degree-completion programs and student success; (b) creating new curriculum; (c) enhancing current programs; (d) identifying services that the institution can improve or add; (e) adapt or change recruiting efforts in order to increase enrollment, retention, and completion rates of nontraditional college students (Carnevale et al., 2010; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; USDOE, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003b).

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this work, the following terms are defined.

Accelerated Degree Program (ADP) –the name of the specific accelerated degree-completion program at the study site, which was (at the time of this study) based on an educational design that presented all coursework that met the requirements for an associate or bachelor’s degree in an accelerated format. The accelerated course at the study site was presented in 16-24 hours of class time over 4 to 6 weeks. Each in-class session was 4 hours long, and it was attended on one night a week. One course was completed after the other, allowing for full-time attendance and credits (minimum of 12 credit hours) per semester versus part-time attendance and credits (11 credit hours or less). Independent work outside of the classroom was a major component of the effective completion of accelerated course work. The ADP semester at the study site was 6 months long, which allowed for flexible scheduling; year-round, full-time study; and credit hours while completing one course at a time. The study site’s traditional undergraduate programs were similar to other institutions of higher learning and presented coursework in 35 to 40 hours over a 15- or 16-week semester; full-time credit status was achieved by attending concurrent courses on multiple days of the week during the daytime hours or in the evening if such scheduling was available.

College Barriers – include one or more of the following: traditional college course scheduling and semesters, competing responsibilities, access to financial resources, family obligations, childcare, full-time employment, past academic failures, absence of academic preparation, and/or lack of or low self-confidence regarding academic achievement.

Enrolled and Registered – a student who has completed admission requirements, is admitted, is attending classes at the college and has been confirmed for coursework for the current semester.

Full-Time Attendance –when a student is registered and completes a minimum of 12 credit hours or more of classwork.

Knowledge Economy – a wealth or resource based on creating, evaluating, and trading knowledge.

Nontraditional Student (NTS) – an adult enrolled in college who is over the age of 24 years and has the presence of one or more of the following (a) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (b) attended college part time, (c) financially independent, (d) works full time while enrolled, (e) has dependents other than a spouse, (f) is a single parent, or (g) did not obtain a standard high school diploma and has a general equivalency diploma (GED). Throughout this paper, the NTS is also identified as an adult learner or adult student, or post-traditional student.

Part-Time Attendance –when a student is registered for and completes 11 credit hours or less of classwork per semester.

Semester– the ADP semester is 26-weeks (versus the traditional semester which is 15 to 16-weeks).

Successful Student – an individual learner who is (a) consistently enrolled and maintaining 2.0 or better grade point average (GPA), and (b) on track toward completing degree requirements.

Traditional College Student – an individual learner who enrolls in college directly after high school and continues through degree completion, who is (a) between the ages

of 18 and 24; (b) enrolled full time; (c) financially dependent on a parent, parents, or other guardian; (d) does not work full time or at all; (e) able to focus on school work; and (f) has a high school diploma.

Chapter Summary

The focus of this research was to discover the characteristics of nontraditional degree-seeking students, enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program, as conditions for success. Furthermore, this mixed method study uncovered the experiences of the NTSs enrolled in the study site's ADP to include the perceived advantages or disadvantages of the accelerated degree-completion program. Permission to use the survey was granted by Aslanian Market Research. The national survey was conducted by and led by Carol Aslanian (Aslanian, Jeffe, Fisher, and Smalec, 2017), and Aslanian Market Research, powered by EducationDynamics, "in the winter-spring of 2015-2016 in order to better understand the needs of post-traditional students and assist institutions in addressing these needs in order to enroll this ever-growing population" (Aslanian et al., 2017, p. 5) of NTSs.

Current research reveals growing levels of enrollment among NTSs, and adults who lack academic preparedness struggle when they enroll in postsecondary education, and many do not complete a college degree. On the other hand, NTSs are persevering and completing college degrees at higher rates than in previous decades despite the multiple challenges they face (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wlodkowski, 2005). With a higher education credential, coupled with academic accomplishment, NTSs tend to gain economic and personal benefits that most likely provide social, political, and economic

benefits for the broader society, and these benefits indicate a strong reason for developing this population (Carnevale et al., 2010; Stokes, 2006; USDOE, 2011).

The theoretical framework used to gain insight on the NTSs is based on adult learning theories derived from a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Three adult learning theories are reviewed and discussed: andragogy, transformative learning, and self-directed learning.

The benefits of conducting this study for researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers include creating or enhancing accelerated degree-completion programs and new curriculum; services; recruiting efforts; and increased enrollment, retention, and completion rates (Carnevale et al., 2010; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; USDOE, 2011).

This research paper has five chapters. The first chapter reviewed the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the potential significance of NTSs and accelerated degree-completion programs for NTSs. The chapter concluded with definitions of terms pertinent to this study. A review of the literature is presented in Chapter 2. The research design, methodology, and analysis are discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

There has been an explosion of literature on the subject of the steadily increasing presence of NTSs on college campuses within the past 10 years, as their enrollment continues to grow faster than traditional students' enrollment (Soares, 2013; NCES, 2009b). Nontraditional college students seeking an academic degree are often referred to as adult learners or adult students. The most recognized and quoted theories discuss NTSs' academic accomplishments in postsecondary education as self-directed persistence and determination toward degree completion. They pursue and value an educational credential for personal and professional reasons. The theoretical frameworks focus on the motivation for degree completion by NTSs and how the NTSs learn, along with their preferences, characteristics, and requirements, compared to traditional college students. This literature review is organized by the growth of the NTS population, the significance of the increase of NTSs to institutions of higher education, and the economic impact to the U.S. workplace. The literature review also includes the role of adult learning theories including andragogy, transformative theory, SDL, personal motivation, and persistence, in addition to the accelerated curriculum, as theoretical constructs found in research.

The purpose of this mixed method study was to discover the characteristics of degree-seeking, nontraditional full-time students enrolled and registered in an accelerated degree-completion program at a liberal arts college in the northeast. Additionally, this

study uncovered the experiences of the NTSs of the ADP. This study used a mixed method data collection instrument utilizing a web-based survey.

Topic Analysis

The nontraditional college student population is a significant and consistently growing group. Presently, the average college student is not a recent high school graduate who enrolls full time and has limited work and family obligations (NCES, 2009b). The current *average* college student, often referred to as an NTS, is older and has work and family obligations to balance with academic studies (Choy, 2002b; Horn & Carrol, 1996; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Consequently, the NTS population seeking degree completion has increased consistently and significantly over the past three decades (Choy, 2002b; Horn & Carrol, 1996; Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; NCES, 2009b; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003b). NTSs constitute the majority of undergraduates enrolled in higher education across the United States, especially when the term *nontraditional* is more broadly defined to include characteristics not typically associated with participation in college (Bell, 2012; Choy, 2002b; Clark, 2012; Holyoake & Larson, 2009). Current research is boldly stating that nontraditional college students are becoming the new traditional students, and they are an important majority on college campuses throughout the United States (Bell, 2012; Clark, 2012; Hess, 2011; Holyoake & Larson, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares, 2013).

Concerns and issues of NTSs. Research about nontraditional college students reveals various issues and concerns that serve as barriers to successful degree completion, which include competing responsibilities, access to financial resources, full-time employment, academic skill sets, past academic failures, and lack of self-confidence due

to delayed enrollment in postsecondary education (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; May & Akin, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2005).

Furthermore, access to student services, such as counseling and library access, are geared toward traditional students (May & Akin, 1998). As a result, NTSs' motivation and expectation for degree attainment is affected (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2005). Institutions of higher education must be prepared to meet this challenge—even if it means deviating from traditional procedures and standards (May & Akin, 1998; Mooney, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wlodkowski, 2003a).

Challenges for colleges and students. Colleges recognize and attempt to address the needs of the NTS population by offering flexible scheduling, accelerated programs, online curriculum, and tuition payment options (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2005). Despite colleges' efforts through alternative scheduling, accelerated programs, and online curriculum to meet existing and emerging needs, NTSs are more likely to leave college without earning a degree, compared to traditional students (Wlodkowski, 2003a). Not completing a college degree is, in part, because the NTS might (a) lack academic preparedness, (b) have multiple stress factors on degree completion such as financial concerns (c) lack access to financial resources, (d) have adult learning style that differ from traditional teaching methods, and/or (e) have trouble coping with conflicting demands of their time (Choy, 2002b; Horn & Carrol, 1996; May & Akin, 1998; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wlodkowski, 2003a; Wlodkowski et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, degree completion by NTSs is growing, in some instances higher than traditional students' completion, and this can be attributed to intrinsic motivation,

persistence, learning goal orientation, and full-time enrollment in accelerated degree-completion programs (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Mezirow, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003a). Consequently, discovering the attributes of successful degree-seeking NTSs enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program is vital to attracting and meeting their requirements. An institution of higher learning can increase enrollment, retention, and degree completion rates for the NTS enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program (Hsu & Hamilton, 2008; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Stokes, 2006; USDOE, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003a; Wlodkowski et al., 2001).

Adult learning theories. As reported by Scott and Lewis (2012), Jinkens (2009) stated that while forming a theoretical foundation for investigating the attributes and perceptions of NTSs, this demographic was a moderately new area of research and, as a result, there are scarce studies and models relating to NTSs in an accelerated degree program. However, adult learning theory is one of the initial constructs that has been central in forming a foundation for research regarding the NTSs (Scott & Lewis, 2012). Therefore, the theoretical framework used to inform this study is based on adult learning theories derived from a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Three adult learning theories are reviewed and discussed: andragogy, transformative learning, and SDL.

Andragogy. While the concept of andragogy as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61) has been used sporadically since the 1830s, especially in Europe, Malcolm Knowles spread its usage in the United States (Cooke, 2010; Holyoake & Larson, 2009; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Smith, 2002). Merriam (2001)

and Smith (2002) posited that Knowles (1968) was a pioneer in adult learning theory because he offered a new label and modern technology by developing the concept of andragogy into a theory. The European model of andragogy was contrasted with pedagogy, which is the art and science of helping children learn (Merriam, 2001). Knowles (1980) stated that andragogy is distinct from traditional pedagogy, and it is based on central assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners, which are different from the conventions about child learners. In 2001 and 2002, respectively, Merriam and Smith reported that Knowles used six characteristics of adult learners to answer the question, “Who are adult learners?” Those characteristics are (a) autonomous and self-directed, (b) individuals who have accumulated a foundation of experiences and knowledge, (c) goal oriented, (d) relevancy oriented, (e) practical, and (f) individuals who have a need to be shown respect. In 2005, Holmes et al. expanded on the prior assumptions and created a learning model (Holyoake & Larson, 2009) that is part of a learning theory system and includes (a) the need to know, (b) the learners’ self-concept, (c) the role of the learners’ experience, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) motivation. In this model, self-concept connects the maturity level a person experiences from dependency to independency (Scott & Lewis, 2012). Andragogy became a uniting point for those trying to define the field of adult education as distinct from other areas of education (Merriam, 2001).

Mezirow’s (1981) definition of andragogy is in alignment with Knowles’s (1968) definition and Mezirow stated that it is “an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners” (p. 21). This type of student knows the extent of the responsibility needed to attend college.

Self-directed learning (SDL). Around the same period that Knowles (1968) presented andragogy to North American adult educators, SDL appeared as another model that helped define adult learners as different from children (Merriam, 2001). SDL is inherent to the assumptions of andragogy; however, it has also been studied from other points of view distinct from Knowles's (1968) theory (Bass, 2012). SDL "suggests that learners need to be in control of their learning" (Bass, 2012, p. 388). Bass also reported that Guglielmino (1977) defined SDL "as a composite of characteristics that create the probability that an individual can accomplish self-directed learning, thus implying that instructors create a learning environment that promotes SDL" (p. 89). This leads to the idea that "if schools create learning environments that encourage SDL, learners will also be transformed into lifelong learners" (Bass, 2012, p. 388).

Transformative learning. Mezirow (1981) stated that transformative theory is a model that consists of structures, elements, and processes of adult learning. The theory's assumptions are constructivist. A learner interprets his or her experience, which is vital to making meaning and therefore learning (Mezirow, 1981). At the core of the NTS is *perspective transformation*, a term introduced by Mezirow in 1978 as the result of a study about women participating in college re-entry programs. The study revealed how breaking free of psychocultural assumptions and traditional stereotypical views of the *proper roles* of women induced them to act (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow, 1981 found the following:

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psychocultural assumptions come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this

structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon this new understanding (p. 6).

NTSs have embraced perspective transformation, which is demonstrated by the dramatic and consistent increase of the NTS population over the past three decades (Merriam, 2001). Today's NTSs believe they can succeed in college and that they have the right to be there (Bass, 2012; Holyoake & Larson, 2009; Stokes, 2006; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005)

Economic impact. Today's workplace has evolved from an industrial environment to a high-tech, service-oriented, knowledge economy (Carnevale et al., 2010; May & Akin, 1998; USDOE, 2007). Higher education is a bridge to a career in the knowledge economy for vast numbers of working adults, and lifelong learning is a necessary ingredient in retraining for a position within the knowledge economy (Carnevale et al., 2010; Mooney, 1994). In 2007, the USDOE reported the Department of Labor's data indicated 90% of the fastest growing jobs required some form of postsecondary education. For the United States to sustain leadership in the knowledge economy, it needs to ensure that Americans are prepared for high-value jobs as knowledge workers (Carnevale et al., 2010; Stokes, 2006). Stokes's (2006) research provides a succinct summary and analysis of the importance of the nontraditional college student to the American economy. He outlined the problem, suggested desired changes, and gave viable solutions. Carnevale et al. (2010) provided an in-depth report supporting Stokes's research with specific projections of where the jobs are located and will be through 2018 and the educational requirements for these jobs. In this respect, focus on nontraditional college students is integral to sustaining the health of the U.S. economy.

Ritt (2008) affirmed Stokes (2006) by stating, “A highly educated workforce is central to our quality of life, success as a global competitor, and to the future of our nation” (p. 16).

Accelerated degree-completion programs. In 2003, Wlodkowski stated that “accelerated learning programs in higher education began around 25 years ago” (p. 13), which means this mode of learning and degree completion at the time of this writing is in its fourth decade. Accelerated learning programs continue to be “one of the fastest-growing transformations in higher education. They are one of the most controversial changes as well, challenging such fundamental academic structures as faculty tenure and the standard four-five clock hours of instruction” (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 5). Although accelerated learning programs are debated among conventional academics and have been criticized “as being too compressed to produce consistent educational value” (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 7), adults welcome and value “completing and attaining degrees in less time than usual” (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 6).

An accelerated degree-completion program offers NTSs with the opportunity to finish their college degrees in a format that is more accommodating and convenient for their lifestyle and needs. An accelerated program presents compressed coursework over a shorter span of time, compared to the traditional 40-hour model of higher education. NTSs can focus on the required learning to complete one course at a time, and upon successful achievement of the course, they can continue with the academic requirements of a degree program.

The demand by working adults for accelerated degree-completion programs has steadily grown over the past four decades, and the programs are being offered in various formats such as online, in the classroom, and in hybrid configurations (Wlodkowski et

al., 2001). Institutions of higher learning are welcoming and embracing this type of programing to meet the needs the of the NTSs (Wlodkowski et al., 2001).

Chapter Summary

Current research reveals growing levels of enrollment among NTSs, and adults who lack academic preparedness struggle when they enroll in postsecondary education, and many do not complete a college degree. On the other hand, NTSs are persevering and completing college degrees at higher rates than in previous decades, especially as students of accelerated degree-completion programs, despite the multiple challenges they face (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wlodkowski, 2005). With a higher education credential, coupled with academic success, NTSs tend to gain economic and personal benefits that most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society, and these benefits may indicate a strong reason for developing this population (Carnevale et al., 2010; Stokes, 2006; USDOE, 2011).

The theoretical framework used to gain insight on NTSs is based on adult learning theories derived from a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Three adult learning theories were reviewed and discussed: andragogy, transformative learning, and self-directed learning.

Accelerated degree-completion programs continue to be a viable and welcome solution to meeting the growing needs of NTSs who have some college credits and no degree, but both types of NTSs do not have the time to attend a traditional college degree program (Wlodkowski et al., 2001). Therefore, the accelerated learning format is here to stay, and it is helping to prepare today's workforce with the knowledge and credentials it

requires to be competitive within the workforce and to be employable (Carnevale et al. 2010, Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wlodkowski et al, 2001).

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The worldview lens that guided this mixed method study is pragmatism combined with postpositivism. This chapter presents a synopsis of the methodology and description of the characteristics of mixed method research that support the reasoning for the study's design. The purpose of this study addresses the research questions:

1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?
2. What are the students' experiences of the study site's accelerated degree program?
3. How does the study site's accelerated degree program address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

Research Context

The research study was conducted in the natural setting of a private liberal arts college in the northeast. At the time of this study, this college offered the only accelerated degree-completion program of its type within the New York City metropolitan area offering four bachelor's degrees plus one associate of arts degree and approximately 11 to 13% of the student population at the study site was enrolled in the ADP. However, prior to the recent addition of master's programs, and partnerships with other organizations for nontraditional undergraduates offered at off-site locations, ADP

students were 25 to 30% of the entire student population. At the time of this study, the institution formed a partnership with a business school that only offers associate degrees and the ADP model for bachelor degree completion was applied to graduates of the business school.

A unique feature of the ADP for NTSs is the ability for students to focus on one course at a time while earning full-time credit hours. The courses are presented and completed in a compressed or accelerated period of 4-, 5-, or 6-weeks, in one 4-hour session per week, along with 15-20 hours of independent coursework. Free textbook(s) (loaned to the students for the duration of the course) and course syllabus are provided at least 1 week in advance of the first session of each course to support independent completion of the required coursework as specified in the course outline. The conventional period for a college course is 15-16 weeks, with 35 to 40 or more classroom hours per semester and multiple class sessions per week. During the admission process, prospective students of the ADP stated that they favored completion of one course at a time in the accelerated format. ADP semesters are 6-months long, and the academic year is 12 months long. The year-round accelerated format allows NTSs to earn full-time credit hours each semester without the added stress of simultaneous coursework and the demands of their everyday lives, which is typically found in traditional academic degree programs. Earning full-time credits also allows eligible NTSs to receive government grants as part of their financial aid package, which includes student loans. However, most of the NTSs at the study site only qualified for student loan funding. The majority of the NTSs were working adults with more responsibilities, such as children, aging

parents, or other personal and professional obligations, and they completed the degree requirements without stopping after their initial enrollment.

Research Participants

The study participant population contained active NTSs, male and female, ages 22 years and over, who were enrolled and registered in the ADP. The researcher obtained approval from the private liberal arts college's provost (Appendix A) to access enrolled and registered ADP students after the researcher received approval from St. John Fisher College Institution Review Board (IRB). The researcher received a list from the registrar's office of the active students as of the spring 2018 and fall 2018 semesters of the ADP, along with their student email addresses. All active ADP students received an invitation to participate through their college email addresses. Only inactive students were excluded from the invitations. Those students who signed the electronic consent form (Appendix B) were able to continue to the survey. Inviting the entire active ADP population ensured that all who were willing to share their experiences and insights had the opportunity to contribute to the study. The expected rate of reply was 10-15% of the ADP student population. Confidence in the rate of reply was due to how the ADP students would be the best supporters of the program because of their personal referrals of the ADP to family and friends, which accounted for the program's growth since 1992. The actual response rate was 36.1%. The participants did not receive compensation or other incentives to participate; however, the invitation was framed as an opportunity to assist fellow and future NTSs through their shared experiences.

Instrument Used in Data Collection

The instrument that was used to collect data for this mixed method was a modified version of a national survey of 48 descriptive questions with opportunities for additional comments from the participants through 10 open-ended questions. The types of questions in the survey instrument varied and included: demographic, multiple-choice single answers, multiple-choice multiple answers, single-text line entry, 10 text essay entries (open-ended questions without a word limit for their reply), rank or rating order, and a matrix table where the participants could agree or disagree with a list of items. The survey was distributed electronically (via email) to the participating students of the ADP (Appendix B). The participants who signed the electronic informed consent form were able to continue to the online survey (Appendix C). The data was collected over a 2-week period.

Open-ended questions. Comments to open-ended questions provide a rich source of data in a mixed method study, and they offer a platform for data that allows for learning about an individual's experiences, feelings, and outlooks (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There were 10 open-ended questions included in the survey with the categories of program design, personal attributes, college learning, and student and teacher interactions.

Validity and reliability in a mixed method. Creswell (2009) stated that validity in a mixed method is defined as the extent to which a concept is accurately measured. The Aslanian Market Research (Aslanian et al., 2017) instrument used in this study established validity because the questions asked of the survey participants could only be answered with verifiable data about themselves. Furthermore, content validity was present in the instrument given that it measured the content that Aslanian Market

Research (Aslanian et al., 2017) intended to measure such as demographic, past and current education, personal attitudes, and beliefs about higher education. The results correlated with the results of other national studies and constructed validity because the scores served a useful purpose and may have positive consequences when they are used in practice to attract, enroll, and retain NTSs. Reliability of this research study and the stability of the responses were established by the consistent coding of the data.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Creswell (2013) stated that the process of analysis for data involves making sense out of the data. Analyzing data involved the following components (a) preparing the data for analysis (data organization); (b) conducting different analysis in order to gain a deeper understanding of the data (reading, memoing); (c) describing and classifying the data into descriptive, NVivo codes and themes; (d) interpreting the greater meaning of the data; and (e) representing and visualizing the data (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). The data is represented with charts, figures, and tables for additional interpretation.

The data collected from the open-ended format were coded into smaller categories of information utilizing NVivo codes, which are names that were the exact words used by the participants (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). There were 10 open-ended questions. NVivo was used for the coding, sorting, and summarizing the data. The data analysis process included the following steps:

1. Review all the qualitative survey data.
2. Import the data into NVivo.
3. Code the data in NVivo using open coding.

4. Define the properties of the themes.
5. Further categorize the data into subthemes as needed.

These codes were entered into a matrix to assist the researcher in organizing the data for reporting results in Chapter 4 and for writing the implications in Chapter 5. Analysis of the comments to the open-ended format involved abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the greater meaning of the data, linking interpretation to the larger research literature developed by others (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). Inductive data analysis was used to look for patterns, categories, and themes until a comprehensive set of themes was established (Creswell, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). The findings from the open-ended questions resulted from the themes that emerged from the data. The participants had a chance to shape the themes that emerged from the process through their responses to the open-ended format (Creswell, 2009; Saldaña, 2013).

Dissemination and disposition of data. A codebook was established in order to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants and the survey results. The focus was on common themes that emerged from the data.

All survey results and files are maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer, which is stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files included assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; the files do not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect the participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis, are safely stored in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to the electronic or paper records. Signed informed consent

documents will be kept for 5 years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices, such that restoring data will not be possible. After analysis of the data and completing this publication, the researcher will present the findings at conferences and in author articles for publication in professional journals.

Informed consent. All elements of informed consent are contained in the consent document and the process of obtaining consent was adequately described. Assent was not required. The study site's IRB process required the study to be set up to allow for the participants' ability to stop the survey at any time and/or to choose not to answer every question, resulting in variances of *n* in the tables within Chapter 4. There were no expected risks.

Positionality. For 10 years, the researcher was the director of admission for the Accelerated Degree Programs of the Division of Adult Education at the study site. However, as of June 1, 2018, the researcher assumed a new role and, at the time of this publication, is the director of compliance and Title IX coordinator. In this role, the researcher does not have daily interactions with any prospective or current ADP students.

Summary

The plan of action for this study followed a specific timeline. The list of active students, along with their student email addresses, were acquired from the Registrar's office, and then an invitation to participate was sent via email to the active ADP students. Only inactive students were excluded. Those students who signed the electronic consent forms were able to continue to the survey.

The methodology for this mixed method involved data collection through a modified replication of a national survey using descriptive questions with opportunities for additional comments by the participants, using an open-ended format. Analyses were conducted utilizing SPSS and NVivo. The data (comments) received from the open-ended format were coded into smaller categories of information utilizing NVivo codes.

Chapter 4: Results

Research Questions

The purpose of this mixed method was to discover how active and enrolled NTSs defined persistence and success in an accelerated degree-completion program at a northeast private liberal arts college. Additionally, this study uncovered the students' experiences of the accelerated degree-completion program and how the study site's ADP addressed the barriers the NTSs encountered in order to retain them and help them to graduate. Qualifying students were active, enrolled, and registered students of the ADP. This chapter reports the findings of the three research questions that guided this study:

1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?
2. What are the students' experiences of the study site's accelerated degree program (ADP)?
3. How does the study site's ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

Data Analysis and Findings

Demographic profile. All active, enrolled, and registered students of the ADP at the study site (155) were invited to participate in the online survey. The survey instrument had 48 descriptive questions with opportunities for extra comments to 10 open-ended questions. The types of questions in the survey instrument varied and included: demographic, multiple-choice single answers, multiple-choice multiple

answers, single text line entries, 10 text essay entries (open-ended questions without a word limit for their reply), rank or rating order, and a matrix table where they could agree or disagree with a list of items. The participants who signed the electronic informed consent form were able to continue to the online survey. A total of 64 participants engaged the survey (41.3%), and of those 64 engaged participants, 56 (87.5%) completed the survey, leading to a final response rate of 36.1%. Six participants did not complete the survey and stopped at various points within the survey, which accounts for the varied sample sizes throughout the tables within this chapter—in addition to the diverse types of questions. The participants could choose to not answer a question, or part of a question, and continue with the survey as required by the study site’s research review board for final approval of the study.

Quantitative Results

Research Question 1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?

Description of the sample. The findings in Table 4.1 reveal that the majority of the sample was female (84.2%), resided in New York State (94.7%), did not live with their parents (86%), lived within 30 miles of the study site (80.7%), and most lived within 10 miles (52.6%), was not first generation to go to college (61.4%), and was employed full-time (77.2%). The largest combined percentage of participants was African American and Hispanic (64.9%), married or had a domestic partner (47.4%), had one to four children under the age of 18 at home (54.4%), were 30- to 40-year-old adults (59.7%), and their family income was \$50,000 to \$75,000 (30.4%). Refer to Table 4.1 for the breakdown within all demographics.

Table 4.1

Frequencies and Percentages for the Demographic Variables (N = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	8	14.0
Female	48	84.2
Ethnicity		
African American	20	35.1
Hispanic	17	29.8
White	12	21.1
Other	4	7.1
Prefer not to answer	3	5.3
State of Residence		
New York	54	94.7
Connecticut	2	3.5
Resides with Parents		
No	49	86.0
Distance from College		
Within 10 miles	30	52.6
11-30 miles	16	28.1
31-50 miles	8	14.0
76-100 miles	2	3.5
First Generation to Go to College		
Yes	21	36.8
No	35	61.4
Relationship Status		
Single, never married	16	28.1
Married/domestic partner	27	47.4
Separated	6	10.5
Prefer not to answer	7	12.3
Children Under 18 at Home		
Yes	31	54.4
No	25	43.9
Total Family Income		
Under \$25,000	2	3.5
\$25,000-\$49,999	11	19.6
\$75,000-\$99,999	7	12.5
More than \$100,000	13	23.2
Prefer not to answer	6	10.5
Age when enrolled in the study site college		
22-24	2	3.5
25-29	12	21.1
30-34	5	8.8
35-39	12	21.1
40-44	6	10.5
45-49	11	19.3
50 or older	8	14.1
Employment status when initially enrolled at the study site college		
Full time	44	77.2
Part time	5	8.8
Not employed, seeking employment	4	7.0
Not employed, not seeking employment	1	1.8
Prefer not to answer	2	3.5

Grade point average and field of study. The cumulative grade point average (GPA) of the participants in the ADP ranged from 2.67 to 4.00; the mean GPA was 3.54 ($SD = .34$). The GPA of the NTSs of the ADP supports the SDL theory, which “suggests that learners need to be in control of their learning” (Bass, 2012, p. 388).

Table 4.2

Descriptive Statistics for Cumulative GPA (N = 57)

Variable	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cumulative GPA	2.67 to 4.00	3.54	.34

Reasons for enrollment in the accelerated degree programs. There were a variety of reasons for registration in ADP that ranged from career development, field of study and specific life triggers that served as motivation

Primary motive for enrollment in the ADP. Most of the participants (70.3%) cited career development as the main reason for enrollment in the ADP, as illustrated in Table 4.3. Career development had two specific areas of motivation: wanting to transition to a new career (33.3%) and seeking a promotion in their field (31.6%). Enrollment for personal reasons was the second major motive (29.8%), with a variety of reasons that included wanting “to finish what I started,” (P6, 17, 20 and 32); “earning a bachelor’s degree is something I have always wanted to do,” (P42), and “the ADP format fit into my educational goals” (P54).

Reason for choosing field of study. The two major reasons for choosing the specific ADP field of study were the following: has always been an area of interest (42.1%) and had work experience in the field (33.6%). The third reason was related to career development and future employment opportunities (21.4%)

Specific event(s) that triggered decision to enroll. The participants noted a variety of events (refer to Table 4.3) that convinced them it was time to continue their undergraduate education in the ADP at the time they enrolled, as opposed to the previous year or the following year. About half wrote about a combination of the listed events on the survey that they had to choose from in addition to other reasons or events that led them to their decision to enroll in the ADP (50.9%). Within another category, the personal reasons for degree completion dominated the comments and included, “It was time to pursue my dream” (P7); “It is a personal goal. I am a first-generation college graduate” (P9); “I wanted something that no one could take away from me: my bachelor’s degree” (P11); “School is conveniently located, and the schedule fits my lifestyle (P42); degree completion is something I always wanted to do, but I could not find an option that fit my life like the ADP at [study site]” (P22); and “I wanted to better myself ,and I felt a degree is one of the tools I need” (P27).

Career development was the second most common topic in the *other* category and specific comments included, “I realized that I will always have an entry level job if I did not obtain my degree. I have the experience, but that is no longer sufficient” (P2); “I was informed that I was strongly considered for the administrator of [a specific division of the employer], but I needed a degree” (P16); and “I am looking to take my career in a different direction, and I needed a degree in order to do it” (P4).

Once the NTSs learned the specifics of the ADP program, they promptly enrolled. The participants’ comments ranged from, “I found out about [study site's] ADP and realized getting my degree was something I COULD do! I would never have gone back to school if it were not for [name of private institution]” (P49); “I just knew it was time

because my children were older, so it was easier especially with the schedule at [study site]” (P14).

Table 4.3

Frequencies and Percentages for Reasons for Enrollment Measures (N = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Primary motive for enrollment in ADP		
Unemployed and needed degree to get a job	2	3.6
Seeking promotion in my field	18	31.6
Wanted to transition to a new career	19	33.3
Returning to job market in years	1	1.8
Personal reasons	17	29.8
Reason for choosing field of study		
Always been an area of personal interest	24	42.1
Area I know there are many jobs in	6	10.5
Emerging career area that will have future jobs	3	5.3
Had work experience in the field	18	31.6
Other	6	10.5
Specific event that triggered decision to enroll		
Ended a relationship	1	1.8
Started a new relationship	1	1.8
Moved to a new city	3	5.3
Living arrangements changed	1	1.8
Got laid off	2	3.5
Passed over for promotion due to lack of education	6	10.5
Financial situation changed	8	14.0
Had a baby	3	5.3
Children went to college	3	5.3
Other or combination of above events	29	50.9

Persons who most influenced decision to enroll in college. The participants noted that the people who influenced them the most were their children ($M = 8.32, SD = 1.76$) and their parents ($M = 8.04, SD = 2.08$). Employers ($M = 7.13, SD = 1.33$) and spouses ($M = 6.50, SD = 1.74$) also had an impact on their decision to enroll (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Descriptive Statistics for Most Influential Person (N = 53)

Person	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Parents	8.04	2.08
Children	8.32	1.76
Employer	7.13	1.33
Spouse	6.50	1.74
Religious leader	5.47	1.76
Co-worker	5.47	1.80
Counselor	3.55	1.03
Teacher	3.06	1.47
Other	2.06	2.66
No one	5.42	3.84

Note. Higher scores indicate more influence.

Past educational experiences. The findings in Table 4.5 reveal that the majority of the participants did well in high school: 33.3% noted they did pretty well and took some advanced-level courses, 26.3% indicated they did all right, and 12.3% stated they did very well and were top students. The selection of a category for self-rating high school performance: *did pretty well, did very well, did alright, mediocre, and struggled*, is based on the participants' interpretation of each category. The largest percentage of the participants had first enrolled in college immediately after high school (56.1%); were aged 20 years or younger, the first time they enrolled in college (64.9%); had attended between 1 and 2 years of college prior to enrolling at the private 4-year liberal arts institution (49.1%); or completed an associate degree (26.3%). The number of credit hours completed prior to enrolling at the study site varied (see Table 4.5); however, the majority had zero (0) to 59 credit hours (66.7%), and 15 participants had completed an

associate degree (26.3%). Prior to enrolling in the ADP, most of the participants either were enrolled at a community college (35.1%) or were not enrolled at any school (36.8%), and almost one-fifth of the participants were enrolled in a 4-year college (17.5%).

Table 4.5

Frequencies and Percentages for Reasons for Past Educational Experience Measures

(*N* = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Self-rating of performance in high school		
Dropped out and completed a GED	9	15.8
Struggled	5	8.8
Mediocre and had to take remedial courses in college	2	3.5
Did alright	15	26.3
Did pretty well; some courses were advanced level	19	33.3
Did very well and was a top student	7	12.3
Length of time after completing high school, first enrolled in college		
Immediately	32	56.1
1 year	4	7.0
2 years	4	7.0
3-5 years	4	7.0
More than 5 years	11	19.3
Did not attend any after high school	2	3.5
Age first time enrolled in college		
20 or younger	37	64.9
21 to 24	7	12.3
25 to 29	4	7.0
30 or older	7	12.3
Only college (study site) I have attended	2	3.5
Highest level of education prior to enrolling at study site		
High school diploma or GED	7	12.3
1 or 2 years of college	28	49.1
Associate degree	15	26.3
2 or 4 years of college	6	10.5
Bachelor's degree	1	1.8
Undergraduate credits prior to enrolling at study site		
None	5	8.8
1 to 15	12	21.1
16 to 30	8	14.0
31 to 45	9	15.8
46 to 59	4	7.0
60 to 75	11	19.3
More than 75	7	12.3
Do not remember	1	1.8
Prior to enrolling at study site, enrolled at		
Community college	20	35.1
4-year college	10	17.5
Vocational/technical school	6	10.5
Not enrolled in any school	21	36.8

Program format and scheduling preferences. Table 4.6 reflects that most of the participants were enrolled full time (86%) and indicated that they were completing the program, as designed, by completing one course at a time and attending the class one night a week (87.7%).

Table 4.6

Frequencies and Percentages for ADP Program Format and Preferences (N = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Program format		
Full time	49	86.0
Part time	8	14.0
Completing courses one at a time and attending school one night a week		
Yes	50	87.7
No	7	12.3

Enrollment decision factors. As shown in Table 4.7, most of the participants only inquired or applied to degree-completion programs for NTSs at the study site (64.9%). The participants were asked to agree or disagree with the 16 statements listed under Beliefs about education, shown in Table 4.7, thereby accounting for the various n. Almost all the participants agreed to the following statements: college is a promising investment (98.2%) and a college degree is important to career advancement (98.2%); however, an anomaly appeared regarding their belief that college was worth the cost—despite their belief that a college degree is important—because the rating drops by 20 points (78.9%). The participants believed that people can be successful without a college degree (80.7%) and going away to college is not necessary to get a good education (86%).

Expectations after graduation. Most of the participants indicated that they expected to change jobs after finishing their undergraduate studies (84.2%). The participants had varying expectations about an increase in salary, with the largest percentage expecting an increase between 20 to 29% (22.8%).

Table 4.7

Frequencies and Percentages for Enrollment Decision Factors (N = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Number of institutions inquired about and or applied		
Only study site	37	64.9
Study site and another school	9	15.8
Study site and two other schools	10	17.5
Beliefs about education ¹		
Need a bachelor's degree to get good job	45	78.9
Enough financial aid available today	24	42.1
An associate degree is enough for many to be successful	14	24.6
College is affordable	12	21.1
Best to go to college right after high school	41	71.9
Technical degrees more likely to get job than other	37	64.9
Going away to college is not necessary to get a good education	49	86.0
Knew what I wanted to study when I was 18	20	35.1
Knew what career I wanted when I was 18	21	36.8
Ended up in the career I thought I wanted when I was 18	12	21.1
Feel uncomfortable in classroom with younger students	18	31.6
People can be successful without a college degree	46	80.7
Wish could have completed studies full-time and lived on campus	22	38.6
College is not worth the cost	11	19.3
Most employers think online is just as good as a classroom education	25	43.9
I think online is just as good as classroom education	18	31.6
College degree is important to career advancement	56	98.2
College is a good investment	56	98.2
College education is worth the cost	45	78.9
Expect to change jobs after finishing undergraduate studies	48	84.2
Percentage increase in salary as a result of earning a degree		
Less than 10%	7	12.3
10-19%	9	15.8
20-29%	13	22.8
30-39%	9	15.8
40-49%	9	15.8
50% or more	9	15.8

Note. ¹Frequencies and percentages refer to the number of participants who agreed (versus disagreed) to the statement.

Research Question 2. What are the students’ experiences of the study site’s accelerated degree program (ADP)?

Belief education would have a good return on investment. As shown in Table 4.8, the participants indicated they believe that their education would have a good return on investment (75.4%) relating to lifetime income or career advancement. The challenge was a multiple-choice, single-answer statement with the response choices of *not at all, somewhat, or very much* were subject to the participants’ interpretation of each term.

Table 4.8

Frequencies and Percentages of Belief Education Would Have a Good Return on Investment (N = 57)

Item	<i>n</i>	%
Education a good return investment		
Not at all	0	00.0
Somewhat	13	22.8
Very much	43	75.4

Research Question 3. How does the study site’s ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

Degree program in which enrolled. The most important criterion for choosing to enroll at the study site, a private 4-year institution, was the flexibility of the course schedules (84.2%). This was followed by length of time to complete the degree (47.4%) and location of the campuses (22.8%). It took most of the participants (89.5%) less than 1 year from the point of inquiry to attending their first class, and the majority of the participants began the first course within 2 to 4 weeks of registering.

Table 4.9 reflects factors that influenced the participants' choices regarding when they wanted to begin the ADP, the course of study they preferred, why they chose the ADP at the study site, and when they expected to complete their degree. All the participants were enrolled in programs leading toward a bachelor's degree. The greatest percentage were enrolled in the behavioral sciences (36.8%), followed by business administration (28.1%), health care administration (22.8%), and the smallest percentage was enrolled in health studies (12.3%).

Table 4.9

Frequencies and Percentages for Fields of Study and Preferences (N = 57)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Length of time from first inquiry to first day of class at study site		
2 to 4 weeks	19	33.3
1 to 3 months	20	35.1
4 to 11 months	12	21.1
More than a year	5	8.8
Field of study		
Behavioral Science	21	36.8
Business Administration	16	28.1
Health Care Administration	13	22.8
Health Studies	7	12.3
Criteria for choosing where to enroll ¹		
Flexible course schedules	48	84.2
Friends and family attended the college	7	12.3
Reputation of the program	6	10.5
Campus locations	13	22.8
Length of time to complete degree	27	47.4
Cost of tuition and fees	6	10.5
Amount of transfer credits	1	1.8
Accreditation of the program	4	7.0
Completed two courses at a time and attended school two nights a week		
Yes	34	59.6
No	22	38.6
Completed, or planning to complete, two courses at a time, and attended or will attend school two nights a week		
Yes	34	60.0
No	21	36.8
No reply	1	1.8
Months or years it will take to complete program		
Less than a year	8	14.0
12 to 23 months	17	29.8
2 years to less than 3 years	16	28.1
3 years to less than 4 years	12	21.1
4 years or more	4	7.0

Note. ¹Frequencies and percentages refer to the number of participants who chose the different criteria.

The majority of participants (87.5%) were completing the program as designed—completing one course at time and attending class one night a week. However, almost half of the participants stated that they had attended class two nights a week in order to further accelerate progress toward degree completion.

Qualitative Results

The researcher's objective was to identify factors relevant to three research questions as reflected in descriptive and open-ended survey responses. Common themes were identified across the data regarding addressing the research questions.

The first level of identification occurred during the initial review of the qualitative survey data. Upon receiving the data, the researcher read the qualitative survey data, analyzed the data, and then conducted open coding utilizing NVivo software, which is an analytic tool to facilitate the coding process.

The researcher used open coding, which utilizes a brainstorming technique described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (p. 160). In open coding, the researcher thoroughly reviews the data contained within the data set before beginning to group and label concepts. The process of coding is taking the raw data and pulling out concepts and then further developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions and grouping them into themes. The data analysis process included the following steps:

6. Review all the qualitative survey data.
7. Import the data into NVivo.
8. Code the data in NVivo using open coding.

9. Define the properties of the themes.
10. Further categorize the data into subthemes as needed.

The resulting themes are described in the summary of the research findings.

Coding. The coding process identified 27 themes. The themes were delineated into three areas, with each area focusing on one of the three research questions. The findings for each research question were summarized and examples from the open-ended survey questions are used to illustrate the themes and subthemes.

Research Question 1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?

Five themes. The themes that emerged from the data related to Research Question 1 are summarized in this section. Intrinsic motivation to complete a college degree and the ability to manage competing responsibilities is evident in Table 4.10, which shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across the open-ended survey questions.

Table 4.10

Themes and Frequencies of Themes for Research Question 1

Theme	# of times theme appeared across qualitative data
Was busy working and still pursued a college degree	20
Had familial duties and responsibilities, but still pursued a college degree	16
Started college and never finished, but returned to college later	8
Pursued their degree even after being told or feeling unqualified	7
Had other interests besides college, but eventually returned to college to pursue a degree	3

Was busy working and still pursued a college degree. The most frequently occurring theme was busy working and still pursued a college degree, and it was

mentioned 20 times in the open-ended survey questions. Examples of the participants' sharing included:

I had a career that did not require a degree, and because I was earning a substantial amount of money, a degree was not a priority. I had to work to support myself and help my family. I worked in the family business (P44). After graduating high school and during my first year in a community college as an accounting major, I was hired by a federal agency to work part time in the evening. I was hired into a full-time permanent position, grew within the organization, and been there ever since (P61).

It took me about three years after delaying my attempt to return to college to enroll [at the study site]. Primary, because I was elected as a Board Director (two 3-year terms) for a limited-profit corporation and wanted to offer more as I was placed in key positions based on my trainings and experience e.g. 2nd VP, VP, and chairperson over various committees (P33).

Participant 58 wrote of conflicting responsibilities that prevented returning to college after completing an associate degree, "I enrolled in college immediately after high school, but attended on and off, completing my associate degree in 4 years. My career was always a priority, and because I had family responsibilities, I chose to make school secondary."

Had familial duties and responsibilities, but still pursued a college degree. The second most frequently occurring theme was had familial duties and responsibilities, but still pursued a college degree, which was mentioned 16 times in the open-ended survey questions. Examples of this theme appear in the following excerpts from the participants:

I migrated from another country, and it took me a while to be settled in. I did not know where to go for help until I started working. I also had a younger sibling I had to take care of, therefore, my first priority was to make sure my sibling was in school (P45).

I graduated high school in 2008 and graduated with my associate degree in 2012 for the reasons mentioned above. Between 2012 and 2017, I could not find a program that fit my lifestyle. Additionally, I moved three times for work during this time, and I was not in one location long enough to commit to school (P40).

I first stayed at home; I was the mother of two small children from 1979-81, I also work at fast-food restaurants but realized that I needed to further my education and enrolled at [proprietary vocation school], however, they only offered a traditional, 16-week semester (P30).

Participant 26 spoke of returning to college after three decades, “For quite a few years, there were some challenging issues with family, so I put it [college] off. I returned after 30 years, once my children were older and capable of handling themselves.”

Participant 48 also referred to the factors that occurred as barriers to returning to college, yet she was motivated to return, “I got married, had three children, and I could not find the right school or the time.”

Started college and never finished but returned to college later. The third theme, started college and never finished but returned to college later, was mentioned eight times in the open-ended survey questions. For example, Participant 31 wrote, “I took off a semester, because I was not sure what school I wanted to attend, and I also wanted a break after high school. It was a mistake.” Participant 29 explained, “I moved back to

NY, met someone, I spent 6 years together before discovering that any more time with him would be a terrible way to spend my time, then I enrolled at [local community college].

I graduated high school in 2008. Graduated with my associate degree in 2012 and between 2012 and 2017, I could not find a bachelor's degree program that fit my lifestyle. Additionally, I moved three times for work during this time. I was not in one location long enough to commit to school (P50).

In a final example of this theme, Participant 43 indicated, "I enrolled in different colleges trying to accomplish a nursing degree, but I did not succeed. I had to work full time."

Pursued their degree even after being told or feeling they were unqualified. The fourth theme, pursued their degree even after being told or feeling they were unqualified, was mentioned seven times in the open-ended survey questions. Examples of the responses that exemplified this theme included the following, "I felt college wasn't for me" (P17). Participant 53 expressed a similar sentiment:

Where I grew up even though I had a high school diploma I was not qualified to attend college any of the colleges. I was born in another country, my father did not allow me to pursue a major of my interest, and a few years later, I realized that I want to pursue a career in the healthcare field.

In this stage of my life, I realized that having an education is very important in order to move ahead in life. My entire life adult life I feel that I was just getting by and when a higher position became available, I did not qualify, even though I had the experience, I did not have a college degree. That is the reason that I enrolled at [the private liberal arts college] in [northeast, NY] (P36).

Feeling shame because Participant 59 could not complete his/her degree was expressed:

It was about 3 years prior to enrollment, when I first met with [admission representative]. I was ashamed because I did not think I would finish something I started. Three years after the initial conversation with [the admission representative] and they said I would have been almost done, and that we all have the same 24 hours in a day, it stuck with me and gave me the initiative I needed to start, stay and finish.

Had other interests besides college but eventually returned to college to pursue a degree. The final theme, had other interests besides college but eventually returned to college to pursue a degree, was mentioned three times in the open-ended survey questions. For example, Participant 53 wrote, “Actually I was going to church camping trips and evangelisms every vacation both in high school and the nursing school.” Participant 28 shared, “It took 14 years to return. I was not interested in going back to school.” Finally, Participant 23 wrote, “It took me ten years to return to college. I was focused on working and wanted to travel and enjoy my life. I was not ready to commit to something so serious at the time.”

Research Question 2. What are the students’ experiences of the study site’s accelerated degree program (ADP)?

Students’ experiences of the ADP. The eight themes relating to this research question are summarized in this section and express the participants’ satisfaction with various aspects of the ADP. In addition, 11 subthemes emerged from the data.

Table 4.11 displays the frequency with which the themes appeared across the open-ended survey questions.

Table 4.11

Themes, Subthemes, and Frequencies of Students' Experiences of the ADP

Theme and Subthemes	# of times theme appeared across qualitative data
Helped reach career and professional advancement goals	42
Satisfied with the flexibility, which balances with other areas of their lives	19
Had qualified and helpful professors	12
Participants were satisfied with the pace	12
Participants were satisfied in general	7
The accelerated program met their needs	7
Curriculum met their needs	6
Suggestions for improvement	
<i>No suggested changes</i>	31
<i>Longer class time</i>	7
<i>More knowledgeable staff</i>	5
<i>More flexible hours and class times</i>	4
<i>Offer more degrees</i>	4
<i>More student support services</i>	3
<i>Course delivered in a variety of ways</i>	3
<i>More time for homework and studying</i>	2
<i>Offer courses more frequently</i>	2
<i>Provide more scholarships and student aid</i>	2
<i>Lower cost to attend</i>	2

Note. Subthemes are italicized.

Helped reach career and professional advancement goals. The most frequently occurring theme for Research Question 2, helped reach career and professional advancement goal, was mentioned 42 times. Examples of the theme appeared in the following qualitative data excerpts, “Yes as I have stated previously ADP gives me the opportunity to do everything I need to do for myself and want to do to ensure my future is bright” (P17). “The ADP program afforded me the opportunity to gain corporate knowledge from the professors, apply for higher paying positions, and increased my

confidence in considering executive positions after I graduate” (P41). Participant 50 expressed his/her satisfaction with the curriculum by noting, “I am able to form a full understanding of each topic discussed in the courses and I am able to apply it to my job.” Participant 38 shared, “I am working in a field that involves research and development of educational programs. Also, after doing my own research I saw that [the study site] had an ADP that would fit into my educational goals.”

Satisfied with the flexibility, which balances with other areas of their lives. The second most frequently occurring theme, satisfied with the flexibility, which balances with other areas of their lives, was mentioned 19 times. When the participants referenced the ADP’s flexibility, they shared the following sentiments, which exemplify the theme, “Yes, it satisfies my needs because it is once a week and that provides me time to complete my assignments” (P34). “I was fearful of going back to college because of my availability. Other colleges only offer classes during the day or on weekends; this program is designed well for us” (P41). “The program satisfies my needs because it allows me the flexibility to continue to work and still attend class” (P54). “Yes, I am satisfied because the schedule works for me and because the staff is awesome” (P47). “Yes, primarily due to the time it is offered. I am able to maintain the same work schedule and honor my weekend commitments” (P50). Participant 41, a parent, succinctly summarized this theme:

As a full time, parent of 4 and full-time worker ADP makes it easier to also be able to accommodate school in my day to day life, which is a very satisfying feeling at the end of the day. I am able to fit it in with the rest of my responsibilities.

Had qualified and helpful professors. The third theme, had qualified and helpful professors, was mentioned 12 times. Participant 51 wrote, “All the professors are very qualified, professional and always willing to help.” Participant 59 shared, “I love the fact that the professors actually work in the profession that teaches. They bring real-life experiences to the classroom and not just focus on what is in the textbooks.” In a final example of this theme, Participant 43 expressed:

My advisor is awesome as well as the other professors. They offer us help and when it is needed, they are stern about the assignments but also understand most of us work full time jobs, have families, and many have not been in school for a while and the curriculum changed so they are willing to explain and help.

Participants were satisfied with the pace. The fourth theme, students were satisfied with the pace, was mentioned 12 times and illustrated by the following comments, “The fast-paced environment helps me to keep my eye on the prize and the resources provided are excellent” (P57). “It allows me the opportunity to finish school at my pace. I am able to juggle between my full-time job, family duties, and school. Once or twice a week in school is manageable” (P19). “Yes, it does meet my needs because I will earn my degree in less than 2 years and will be able to be considered for promotion with my employer” (P20). “Yes, it satisfies my needs because it is one day per week for 4-5 weeks with book loans for each class” (P15). The pace of the program worked for Participant 19 and his/her career development: “It has given me the opportunity to know more of what I did not about managerial experience without having to take long semester.” Participant 51 also expressed satisfaction with the pace of the ADP: “It is

very rewarding to know that you can finish your degree in less than 4 years, while maintaining your everyday lifestyle.”

Participants were satisfied in general. The fifth theme, students were satisfied in general, was mentioned seven times. Participant 62 shared a general satisfaction with the ADP and said, “Yes, the accelerated degree program has satisfied my needs. The program provides counseling, books, and syllabus in advance.” In a final example of this theme, Participant 62 wrote, “Great school, great program, and wonderful instructors. I am enjoying every moment.”

The accelerated program meets their needs. The sixth theme, the accelerated program meets their needs, was also mentioned seven times. The participants shared the following ideas that reflect this theme “Yes, as I have stated previously it gives me the opportunity to do everything, I need to do for myself and want to do to ensure my future is bright” (P25).

A working adult who was hesitant to return to college because of his/her full life stated:

The accelerated degree program satisfies my needs. It is an excellent program for busy, working adults. I was fearful of going back to college because of my availability. Other colleges only offer classes during the day or on weekends; this program is designed well for us (P51).

Participant 19 concisely expressed his/her experience with the ADP as, “My needs are simple, to complete my degree.”

Curriculum meets their needs. The seventh theme, curriculum meets their needs, was mentioned six times. In an example of this theme, coupled with a suggestion for improvement, Participant 10 expressed:

All my needs were met with the curriculum; I would like to see added to the Healthcare Administration Program is a labor relations course or a budgeting strategy course. This will provide the student with information needed to excel in those areas.

Another participant shared, “I have some experience in business administration, but the accelerated program fills in all the missing pieces for me” (P37). In a final example, Participant 39 shared, “It has given me the opportunity to know more of what I did not know about managerial experience without having to take [a] long semester.”

Suggestions for improvement of the ADP format or structure. The final theme for Research Question 2 was suggestions for improvement of the ADP format or structure. This theme was further classified into 11 subthemes. Each subtheme is discussed below.

No suggested changes. The number one subtheme, no suggested changes, to the question regarding changes to the ADP was mentioned 31 times, providing considerable evidence regarding how the ADP format worked for the NTSs. Samples of responses that exemplified this subtheme were: “There is nothing that I would change about the accelerated degree program’s format” (P36). “No, I would leave everything the same. The structure of the program is presented perfectly. This format has been working for me so far” (P39). Participant 36 echoed the last view with “There is always room for improvement, but so far, I feel it is excellent,” and “Nothing that I can think of, it is

pretty solid. No change needed. I would not change anything about the structure of this program” as expressed by Participant 15.

Longer class time. The second subtheme, longer class time, was mentioned seven times. A student exemplified this theme by writing, “There are some classes that I would like to have extended time with” (P47). Another suggested, “So far what I would change to the format of the accelerated program is the senior seminar. I would probably add one more week to that first course and not offer it during the end of year holiday season” (P23). Similarly, Participant 47 wrote, “I would suggest that maybe the major courses be a little longer than four or five weeks and should all be six weeks so students can get a better understanding of their major course studies.”

More knowledgeable staff. The third subtheme, more knowledgeable staff, was mentioned five times. Participant 19 exemplified this subtheme by writing:

It would be great to have the ability to deal with the financial people to the same degree as we do with the Adult Education staff. I found it difficult to sort my billing and I was not getting a call back from that department - I almost ended up not coming back because I was frustrated. Luckily, I called again and got someone who was helpful.

The need for more support staff was mentioned by Participant 30, “I believe the administrative offices for AE [Adult Education] are stretched thin. Sometimes conversations or emails are forgotten, or communication is difficult. More staff to assist the office would be helpful.” Other participants offered explicit suggestions and stated a need for additional knowledgeable and responsive support staff in areas outside of academics such as the career development and financial aid offices:

Based on my recent experience, it appears to me that the career development office, which to the best of my understanding is supposed to support students finding opportunities to exercise their studies, and prepare them to join the workforce as they graduate, is not committed to performing its job. I have attempted to work with them during the last three months and their limited/sporadic response, if at all provided, is making me believe that the wonderful programs taught by the College faculty are shadowed with lack of assistance provided by the personnel of the Career Development Office (P46).

Participant 10 wrote:

I would suggest that someone from the financial aid office lead seminars and expand on the information we received during the admission process from [admission representative] regarding student loans, subsidized and unsubsidized, the difference between government grants such as New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Pell. For example, they could explain what happens if a student registers for 12 credits but decides to drop a course and the credit load is reduced. In addition to explaining the impact of failing a course, or how to handle out of pocket expenses in case we do not have enough aid (loans and grants). [Admission representative] did a great job explaining the challenges and rewards of returning to school as an adult, along with how financial aid works and having that level of ongoing support is essential.

More flexible hours and class times. The fourth subtheme more flexible hours and class times was mentioned four times. The participants generously expressed their thoughts and suggestions about this subtheme by writing:

The program satisfies my needs with the exceptions of the some of the required seminars which are offered during the days and at times that hardly accommodates a full-time worker who get off at 5 pm. The Writing Center accommodates the day students more than the Adult Education [AE] students and there is no cafe or food options in the summertime for the AE students.

I think that classes on Fridays or even on Saturday would be very beneficial to students, it seems that most classes are been taught on Monday and Wednesdays, so students do not have a choice, but to manage their work schedule and family time around the school's schedule (P47).

The only thing that is sometimes difficult is when you have two courses at once and are attending class twice a week. This is difficult because you are in the very beginning or one course, which may create a little anxiety and definitely takes a lot of reading and preparation. On the other hand, you are nearing the end of another course, so you need to study for finals and write a number of papers or presentations, so your plate feels very full (P51).

Participant 37 suggested, "Maybe offer a different class time along with the current 6pm-10pm."

Offer more degrees. The fifth subtheme, offer more degrees, was mentioned four times. Sample responses include the following, "I would make the courses for the major at least six weeks, and I would provide a master's program for psychology and/or social work" (P15). The participants expressed similar thoughts about specific programs, such as Participant 22, writing, "I wish there were more degree options available and I DEFINITELY wish the nursing program was more tightly incorporated with my degree

program, but I do not think that is as much a failure of the Adult Education program as it is with the nursing program.” Participant 39 also offered detailed and specific feedback and suggestions for more choices of degree programs in addition to his/her personal preference to attend the study site:

I do wish that there were more master’s degree options available at [study site] especially in the medical field such as a physician’s assistant program. I also wish the nursing program would integrate better with the ADP program and offer a seamless transition or at a bare minimum offer classes beginning in January [instead of only in August]. Best case would be a nursing program offered during the evenings and weekend because I have to work. I would further my education at [study site] if any of the programs or options I mentioned were available.

Regretfully, my experience as a [study site] student will end when I complete the ADP and graduate with my bachelor’s degree (P39).

More student support services. The sixth subtheme, more student support services, was mentioned three times. Participant 35 offered these suggestions: “I would enhance the format by offering an MBA program and incorporating the Writing Center into the courses that require extensive research. Especially during the summer months.” One more student, Participant 22, shared, “I would like to see more student services for AE students that the traditional daytime students get on campus. Such as tutors during the summer months and extended library hours.”

Course delivered in a variety of ways. This was the seventh subtheme, course delivered in a variety of ways, was mentioned three times. Participant 37 shared, “What I would enhance is adding more hybrid courses. I took one and loved it.” Participant 48

indicated, “I would like to see more seminars (which are required to graduate).”

Participant 46 added, “I would like to be able to take traditional classes as well as nontraditional in the Adult Education program. Also, to have more hybrid or online courses offered.” In a final example of the subtheme, Participant 41 wrote, “I wish some of the classes were offered online. But not all of the classes as I have heard that some employers do not consider an entirely online degree to be as good as in-class programs.”

More time for homework and studying. This was the eighth subtheme, more time for homework and studying, was mentioned two times. Participant 32, explained the challenges the participants work through with the volume of homework of an accelerated course:

The only thing that is sometimes difficult is when you have two classes at once because you are in the very beginning or one class, which may create a little anxiety and definitely take a lot of reading and preparation. On the same hand, you are nearing the end of another course, so you need to study for finals and write a number of papers or presentations, so your plate feels very full.

An additional student expressed:

The only thing I would change is sometimes there is not a lot of time for some adults to do so much homework because we do have to work and take care of kids. If teachers could slow down on the homework that would great (P17).

Offer courses more frequently. The ninth subtheme, offer courses more frequently, was mentioned twice. Participant 7 wrote, “Some classes are not offered in the same semester, making it hard to continue or finish the program faster.” Participant

10 wrote, “Maybe make some classes available a little more often. But really, all in all, ADP is a great program.”

Provide more scholarships and student aid. The 10th subtheme, provide more scholarships and student aid, was mentioned two times. Participant 25 stated, “As far as the format, it would be great to also offer scholarships for top students.” Participant 35 mentioned, “College is expensive. The costs may deter some potential students from pursuing their college education. More government aid is needed.”

Lower cost to attend. This final subtheme, lower cost to attend, was mentioned two times. Participant 27 exemplified this theme as it is related to their choice of degree by writing, “Additionally, a lowered cost per credit would be nice. With a behavioral science degree, I will not become rich overnight . . . therefore paying back the student loan afterwards will greatly impact my life.”

Research Question 3. How does the study site’s ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

Fourteen themes. The 14 themes that developed from the data relating to Research Question 3 are summarized in this section, and they provide rich and specific data in support of an accelerated degree-completion program as a viable solution for attracting, retaining, and graduating NTSs. Table 4.12 shows the frequency with which the themes appeared across the open-ended survey questions.

Table 4.12

Themes and Frequencies of Themes for how an Accelerated Degree Completion Program Addressed the Barriers NTSs Encounter in Order to Retain and Graduate NTSs

Theme	# of times theme appeared across qualitative data
Flexible course scheduling for those with busy schedules	78
Short accelerated classes and degree program	54
Helps reach goal of achieving a college degree	53
Tailored to adult learners' needs	36
Helpful and supportive staff	33
Increases motivation to complete the course or program	28
Textbook loan program reduces expenses	26
Being with a cohort of similar peers	12
Small cohort or class size	11
Convenient location close to home or work	9
Ease of registering for courses	5
Desirable programs of study	3
The cost is affordable	2
The transfer credit policy and possible credit for prior learning experiences	2

Flexible course scheduling for those with busy schedules. The most frequently occurring theme for Research Question 3, flexible course scheduling for those with busy schedules, was mentioned 78 times. The following participants expressed clear examples of these themes:

Most appealing was that the ADP is a one night a week, once course at a time and many students graduating from this same program had mentioned how great it was. I was attracted to [study site's] accelerated degree programs primarily because of the flexible schedule. Having only to attend class once a week is ideal for someone like myself who has children and works full-time (P39).

ADP is very good for any person with a busy schedule. What attracted me about [study site's] program was how easy it worked around my hectic life schedule. Flexibility of the dates of the classes. The time of each courses. My work and school schedule meshed very well (P24).

The hours in which classes were available were convenient for someone who works. The fact that books are loaned, and not purchased. The ease of registering. Classes are assigned as needed and scheduling is flexible versus the conventional method of scheduling on-line or in person in the hopes of obtaining all the classes that fulfill your core and course requirements (P52).

Participant 5 wrote, "The fact that you can take one course at a time one day a week gives me the opportunity to concentrate on one class without feeling overwhelmed," and Participant 2 responded with, "The ability to attend a required course and to only have to attend one class a week. The ability to complete the program within a short period."

Short accelerated course and degree program. The second most frequently occurring theme, short accelerated classes and degree program, was mentioned 54 times. For example, Participant 5 expressed, "I love the fact that courses are four, five and 6-weeks. This was more my speed." Participant 8 stated,

The ability to attend a required course and only attend class one night a week while completing the degree program within a short period was perfect. I was attracted by the course structure of four, five, or six-week courses, how they lend you the books, and by the small campus which means a lot because you remain a person and not a number within the school.

Participant 13 wrote at length about how the accelerated format allowed her to work, go to college, and “still have a life”:

I took a break from college for about a year and a half; because my father became very ill and my family needed to support each other. Then I started my search for a program to complete my bachelor’s degrees. I enrolled at [local four-year private college] because they offered me a scholarship and it is my mom’s alma mater, but I had second thoughts about enrolling in a traditional style program. The 16-week semesters coupled with taking five or six courses at the same time during the day meant I would have to quit my job and depend on my parents. When I received a postcard advertisement about ADP in the mail from [study site], I realized I was finally old enough for an adult accelerated program, I jumped on the opportunity. I did not have to quit my job as I thought I would have to do if I attended [local four-year private college]. I did not have to put my entire life as I knew it on hold. The ADP gives me the opportunity to work on all of my goals at once while supporting myself AND earning my degree.

Helps reach goal of achieving a college degree. The third theme, helps reach goal of achieving a college degree, was mentioned 53 times. Participant 21 offered, “In general, the ADP program was time saved and offers the ability to advance in my career quicker. I wanted to complete my degree in less time than the traditional way.”

Additional examples of the theme, as expressed by the participants’ responses, follow:

I wanted to complete school and obtain a bachelor’s degree, but I felt like I did not have the time to do it. [Study site] offered an accelerated program that would allow me to obtain my degree and not take as long as a traditional college.

The speed of the program makes the end goal of a completing a degree an obtainable goal without long drawn out classes (P16).

Yes, I explored several “adult” programs at other colleges, but [study site’s] ADP program is unique in that it is continuous 12 months of the year until you graduate. I believe if a person is focused and disciplined, the four to six-week class sessions are beneficial, and the accelerated format was one of many areas that motivated me to return to school (P3).

Tailored to adult learners’ needs. The fourth theme, tailored to adult learners’ need, was mentioned 36 times. One participant indicated, “The program is very accommodating to adult students.” Another participant shared, “[Study site’s] ADP fit into my life, not the other way around.” Similarly, Participant 17 explained, “We all have our lives outside of work and sacrificing a couple of hours a week, one day a week helps you towards achieving a higher education.” In a final example of this theme, Participant 24 wrote:

I did my first year of college at [a local community college] as a full-time student. The workload was too much and by the end of the year I realized I could not even be a good mother to my two kids. I went to bed late and the only way to finish my homework was to get up early by 4am. Even though I did not give up and some of my grades were good, I got sick trying to manage my anxiety. In summary, one course at a time, one night a week is manageable. My stress levels have gone down, and I feel healthier and happier.

Helpful and supportive staff. The fifth theme, helpful and supportive staff, was mentioned 33 times. Examples of data that exemplify this theme follow:

When I called and spoke to the admissions counselor, [admission representative] over the phone prior to me coming in she made me very comfortable as she explained the details about the college, facility, program and how she personally expressed she would be my source of encouragement from start to finish. (I needed that, and she kept her word. Thank You [admission representative].) (P55).

I received multiple calls and emails from [admission representative] during the admission process and then from [academic staff member] of the [academic] department after I was admitted. I felt like they were both genuinely interested in helping me meet my educational goals. I had hoped that the individualized attention I received would not change once I applied and fortunately it did not. I still feel as though staff in the program want me to graduate and succeed (P1).

I received an amazing reception by the director of admissions for ADP, which happened to be [admission representative]. On my first meeting with her, she provided thorough explanations and demonstrated patience for me throughout my endless questions about the program. She helped me to make the decision, on the same day, to complete my education there. She is amazing! (P3).

The personal attention and compassion exhibited by the study site's staff was clearly expressed and appreciated by Participant 37, "The willingness of everyone's help and the assurance that I can finish this with the support of the staff and professors is appreciated."

Increases motivation to complete the course or program. The sixth theme, increases motivation to complete the course or program, was mentioned 28 times.

Participant 18 expressed "Yes, completing each course gives me a sense of satisfaction.

Every month you can watch your college credits increase, which motivates you to reach the finish line.” Other participants shared how the format of the ADP increased their motivation as illustrated in the following comments,

Yes, the format of the ADP has been the motivation from day one. The ability to learn a course in four to six weeks is phenomenal. Classes are more enjoyable. One course at a time has helped me to focus (P27).

Yes, the ADP structure eliminates most excuses to drop out or attempt at a later date. The format/structure does in fact motivate me to finish because although the coursework may be a lot in a short period, and if you focus and get it done, you are finished! (P14).

I am more motivated because I can finish in less than half the time. It motivates me to know that I can give my best to a course of four to six weeks and earn a good grade in a course with subject matter that I may or not enjoy (P46).

Yes, the format makes taking classes so much easier. I am able to attend classes with ease, focus on other areas of my life while completing my degree, and I do not have to worry about buying books. Absolutely. I would never finish if I had to take a 16-week course (P12).

Participant 22 stated, “The accelerated format of the ADP was the speed of the program makes the end goal of a degree an obtainable goal without long drawn out classes.

Allowing for work and life responsibilities to coincide with the program.”

Participant 39 expanded why and how the ADP increased the participants’ motivation to complete their degrees:

Yes, the format is absolutely motivating because I have no room for excuses. With all of the help my professors provide and the open line of communication most of them extend to my classmates and myself; if I fail it's because I simple didn't try hard enough. It is nothing like traditional school. I do not have to worry about not being able to afford my textbooks. I can build my schedule around my classes because there is no guessing, I know exactly what class I will have next and when it will meet. I literally could go on and on about how pleased I am. Yes, the ADP does motivate me. I am not letting anything stop me from finishing this program

Textbook loan program reduces expenses. The seventh theme, textbook loan program reduces expenses, was mentioned 26 times. The participants referenced how the textbook loan program reduced expenses and worry in a variety of ways:

Another very beneficial part of this program is the fact that we do not have to purchase our textbooks. There is not another school around that offers a book loan program that is a financial relief to people like me (P56).

The book loan program is excellent because financial aid does not cover the cost of books, therefore if we were to attend another college with a traditional program, we would be required to pay out of pocket for books. This program saves us a great deal of stress and money. I do not have to worry about not being able to afford my textbooks (P9).

The book loan was excellent; it relieved me of the task of trying to locate books from the store and cuts down on expenses. Not having to pay for books was a VERY nice addition as it was one less thing to worry about. Not having to fight

for books in a library or hunt around for cheap books online was such a welcome joy (P14).

Being with a cohort of similar peers. The eighth theme, being with a cohort of similar peer, was mentioned 12 times. For example, Participant 21 wrote:

The fact that your peer group is in the same situation as you. The students are older and take their academic careers seriously. Not attending classes with students who have yet to experience life and the responsibilities that go with it is refreshing.

Participant 29 noted, “Smaller classroom size with students my age and being able to take one class a week,” and Participant 31 shared, “The fact that age does not matter, there are students of all different ages, therefore I do not feel out of place.” In a final example, Participant 46 explained:

Having a cohort is very helpful. You meet people in your first or second class and form connections while working on group project etc. So, when they see that you’re burned out or emotionally drained they share kind words or let you know that you will make it; that we all will make it. It has been very helpful to have that team/family like dynamic.

Small cohort or class size. The ninth theme, small cohort or class size, was mentioned 11 times. Collective comments by Participants 12, 52, 23, 34, 29, and 58 noted that they enjoyed that “it’s a small college,” “small group of students,” “the small class sizes,” “smaller classroom size with students my age,” “smaller class sizes and a small cohort,” and “I was attracted by the small campus which means a lot because you remain a person and not a number within the school.”

Convenient location close to home or work. The next theme, convenient location close to home or work, was mentioned nine times. Participants 42, 15, and 11 shared “What attracted me to [study site 's] Accelerated Degree Programs was the distance from my home to the small campus,” “The college is close from my work place and home,” “Proximity of location,” and “School is conveniently located and the schedule fits my lifestyle.”

Ease of registering for courses. The 11th theme, ease of registering for courses, was mentioned five times. For example, Participants 3, 5, and 61 wrote the following “The ease of registering,” “I was attracted to [study site’s] accelerated degree program because of the rolling registration,” “I attended an open house and the ease of the application process kept my attention,” “Yes, the rolling registration is very motivating because you feel accomplished after completing each course,” and “Class registration is handled by the academic department and didn’t require me running around trying to fight for class availability.”

Desirable programs of study. The 12th theme, desirable programs of study, was mentioned three times. Participant 46 wrote, “The courses appealed to my desire to study psychology.” Participant 39 explained, “As a former teacher I felt that this subject would coordinate very nicely with the skills I already have. I’m hoping to improve my chances of being hired in the future.” Participant 49 expressed:

I felt that this particular degree will be an import tool in my pocket for my future plans. I intend to work in a more practical aspect of healthcare (likely nursing or physician’s assistant) for a few years but having an understanding of healthcare management is key if I want to progress up the hierarchy.

The cost is affordable. The thirteenth theme, the cost is affordable, was mentioned two times. Participants 4 and 10 shared, “The price, course set up, and the fact that they loan books at no cost makes ADP affordable,” and “The way the program requirements are reviewed in order to accommodate your schedule and your financial circumstances make you feel that you shouldn’t have excuses to finish.”

Policies for transfer credit policy and credit for prior life learning experiences. The final theme regarding policies relating to transfer credits and credit for prior life learning experience was mentioned twice. The data indicative of this theme include the following as written by survey Participants 12 and 34, respectively, “The ability to transfer in some credits from past colleges,” and “The benefit of work experience can be converted into credits in some cases.”

Summary of Results

Summary of quantitative results. The findings reveal that most of the participants were female, African and Hispanic American, resided in New York State, and lived within 30 miles of the study site; however, most lived within 10 miles of the study site. The participants chose the college because of the ADP and its proximity to their homes and employment.

Proximity of the study site school to the participants’ homes or workplaces aligns with the results of Aslanian Market Research’s (Aslanian et al., 2017) national study and the NTSs’ preferred distance to travel. The Aslanian et al. (2017) study posited that “one-quarter of post-traditional students prefer to travel less than 10 miles to the institution where they enroll; two-thirds prefer to travel 30 miles or less” (p.8). Most of the participants in this current study did not live with their parents, were married or in a

domestic partnership, and lived with one to four children under the age of 18 years.

Surprisingly, most of the participants were not the first generation in their families to go to college, but they were influenced and encouraged by family, friends, and coworkers to attend and complete their college degrees.

There were three primary reasons for enrollment at the study site: (a) the ADP, (b) participants wanted to transition to a new career, and (c) the participants sought promotions in their field for personal reasons. Over three-quarters of the participants in this current study were employed full time, reflecting the Aslanian Market Research national survey (Aslanian et al., 2017), and they were enrolled as full-time college students to complete a bachelor's degree (p. 13). Most of the participants were 30- to 40-year-old adults, which was the opposite of the Aslanian Market Research (Aslanian et al., 2017) results, which reported 54% of their surveyed participants were "under the age of 29" (p. 28). However, the combined household income of \$50,000-\$74,000 matched the Aslanian et al. (2017) findings, and the "Census Bureau nationwide figures for 2014" (Aslanian et al., 2017, p. 30). The ADP participants in this current study were motivated by the potential to increase their income and improve their career trajectory with the completion of a college degree. The median household income for 2017 in the New York State county of the study site was \$89,968 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), and the living wage for the same area in 2018 ranged from \$65,145 for a family of one adult and one child to \$112,819 for one adult and three children (Glasmeier & MIT, 2019). Despite the multiple responsibilities of the ADP students, their mean GPA was 3.54, and this speaks to the NTSS' motivation to succeed combined with their desire to apply and

maximize what they learned in college within their occupation and or future employment options.

The three reasons for the study participants choosing the specific ADP field of study was led by a statement that it has been an area of interest, followed by the participants had work experience in the field, and they knew there were many jobs in that area, or it was an emerging career area that will have future jobs. The third finding supports just how NTSs are “paying attention to how the job market has and will continue to grow” (Aslanian et al., 2017, p.11).

The main trigger event that the participants cited as leading them to enrollment or returning to college was stated as *other* or there was a combination of items. Comments included in the other categories were “It was time to pursue my dream,” and “It is a personal goal.” These events also involved how the participants’ financial situation had changed, or that they were passed over for a promotion, and the circumstances convinced them it was time to continue their undergraduate education in the ADP.

Aslanian et al. (2017) stated, “The speed of decision making” is “in contrast to the traditional student recruitment and enrollment cycle” (p. 19), and the participants of this study similarly mirrored the findings of the Aslanian Market Research national study. When the participants learned the specifics of the unique ADP program, they took prompt action and enrolled. Most of the participants were completing the ADP as it was designed, by completing one course at a time and attending class one night a week. Almost all the participants agreed a college degree is a good investment and important to career advancement. The participants indicated that they expected to change jobs after finishing their undergraduate studies, had varying expectations regarding an increase in

salary, and indicated they believed their education would have a good return on their investment. The most important condition for choosing to enroll in the ADP at the private 4-year institution was the flexibility of course schedules, followed by length of time to complete the degree, and the location of the campus. All the participants were enrolled in programs leading toward a bachelor's degree, and the greatest percentage of the participants were enrolled in the behavioral sciences degree followed by business administration degree.

Summary of qualitative results. The open-ended questions provided a rich source of comments that resulted in five themes for Research Question 1, how the participants define persistence and success. The themes listed in Table 4.10 reflect the resilience and determination of the NTSs in the ADP. Once these students made up their minds to complete a bachelor's degree, they persevered—regardless of what was happening in their lives and in the midst of multiple responsibilities such as full-time employment, children, and/or a change in their financial situation or employment. Their candid and personal responses to the open-ended questions were detailed and lengthy.

The participants' answers to the survey questions relating to Research Question 2, regarding the students' experiences of the ADP resulted in eight themes and 11 subthemes, as outlined in Table 4.11. The dominant theme was how the ADP helped the participants reach career and professional advancement goals through the second principal theme, which was the program's flexibility that helped them balance other areas of their lives. The participants of this study and of the ADP also expressed satisfaction with the professors and the pace of the program. The eighth theme, suggestions for improvement of ADP, resulted in 11 subthemes. The number one suggestion was no

suggested changes and it was mentioned by over half of the participants. The remainder of the subthemes outlined specific areas in which the institution could make improvements to the program, along with recruiting efforts and enrollment processes, and then supporting registered students to attract, retain, and graduate a greater number of NTSs through the ADP.

The qualitative data received for Research Question 3, how did the ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students, provided the students' perspectives and another roadmap for the ongoing success of the ADP and the development of future programs. The data resulted in 14 themes relating to how this accelerated-degree completion program specifically addressed the barriers the NTSs encountered and prevented them from degree completion. The overwhelming responses were specific to the flexibility of course scheduling, the shorter accelerated courses, which were coupled with year-round attendance that helped them reach their goal of achieving a college degree. The supportive and encouraging staff they interacted with influenced their experience. Many of the participants referred to their key point of contact—the admission representative—who guided them through the process and sometimes over long periods of time. The participants' positive experience continued as they worked with the academic advisor who also created the participants' schedule and then registered them for their course. A major factor of ongoing satisfaction was the textbook loan program that spared the ADP students of additional financial burden. The ADP students expressed appreciation and relief about not having to buy books.

In summary, the quantitative and qualitative data of this chapter included a summary of the findings, the data analytic approach, and tables summarizing the frequency of the themes and subthemes. Furthermore, the explicit number of participants who mentioned a specific theme and subtheme, and examples of the themes and subthemes, along with direct quotes, were provided. Noteworthy findings were the participants' overall satisfaction with the ADP format and support processes while satisfying their foremost need, "My needs are simple, to complete my degree" (P19).

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed method was to discover how active and enrolled NTSs, who are generally described as being over 24 years of age, defined persistence and success in an accelerated-degree completion program at a northeast liberal arts college.

Additionally, this study sought the students' experiences of the accelerated-degree completion program and how the institution's specific ADP addressed the barriers the NTSs encountered. The methodology for this mixed method involved data collection through a modified national survey instrument with 48 descriptive questions and opportunities for additional comments from the participants through 10 open-ended questions. This study revealed how the NTSs, enrolled in the study site's ADP, defined success, and persistence. The NTSs also disclosed their experiences of the program and confirmed how the ADP addressed their barriers to degree completion. This present study provided rich data and answered the following three research questions:

Research Question 1. How do active, nontraditional students enrolled in an accelerated degree-completion program define persistence and success?

The quantitative results revealed:

1. Most of the participants were African and Hispanic American women, who worked full-time and attended college full-time; were in their 30s and 40s; were married or in a domestic relationship; lived with one to four children; were not first-generation college students; lived within 10 to 30 miles of the

study site, with the majority living within 10 miles; and the household income was between \$50,000 to \$74,999.

2. The primary motives for enrollment of the participants were to transition to a new career, seeking promotion in their field, or for personal reasons.
3. The participants chose a specific field of study because it was an area of interest and they had work experience in the field.
4. The participants had varying expectations regarding an increase in salary and expressed their belief that a college degree meant advanced career opportunities with higher levels of compensation.
5. The participants were triggered to enroll by a combination of specific events including being passed over for a promotion due to lack of education and their financial situation had changed.
6. Most of the participants enrolled with some college credits and with clarity about completing a bachelor's degree because they believed a bachelor's degree was necessary to getting a *good* job.
7. The mean GPA of the participants was 3.54, which reflected their serious and determined attitude to be successful.

The qualitative results revealed five themes that indicated persistence and success toward degree completion, regardless of the participants' circumstances. The five themes were:

1. busy working and still pursued a college degree;
2. had familial duties and responsibilities, but still pursued a college degree;
3. started college, and never finished, but returned to college later in life;

4. pursued their degrees even after being told or feeling unqualified; and
5. had other interests besides college, but eventually returned to college to pursue a degree.

Research Question 2. What are the students' experiences of the study site's accelerated degree program (ADP)?

The qualitative results revealed that almost all the participants believed a college education is important to career advancement and is a good investment. However, three quarters of the participants stated that they did not believe college is worth the cost. This may be correlated to the fact that the NTSs at the study site had to finance their education through loans and personal funds. Government grants could not cover the full tuition.

The qualitative results revealed:

1. Eight themes related to the participants' experiences of the ADP. The most cited theme clearly indicates how the program helped the participants reach career and professional advancement goals, and that theme was followed by satisfaction with the flexibility of the program, which balances with other areas of their lives. Qualified professors were the third most cited item cited by the participants, followed by satisfaction with the pace of the program.
2. The number one theme for suggestions for improvement of the ADP was no suggested changes. However, the participants offered ideas for improvement that would make the program even more appealing and supportive of their lives and goals such as longer class time for required courses within program of study (major), varied scheduling options (different days of the week and hours), plus more support staff.

Research Question 3. How does the study site's ADP address the barriers nontraditional students encounter in order to retain and graduate nontraditional students?

The quantitative results revealed:

1. These participants researched different colleges, career options, and they followed the trends of the job market. The two most important criteria for choosing to enroll in the ADP was the accelerated format and the flexibility of course scheduling. These criteria were followed by the length of time to complete the degree, location of the campus, the school's accreditation and reputation (most were referred by someone they knew), the cost of the program, and the transfer credit policy.
2. All participants were enrolled in programs leading toward a bachelor's degree. The greatest percentage were enrolled in the behavioral sciences program, followed by business administration and health care administration programs. their choice of degree programs reflects their awareness of the job market.
3. More than half the participants indicated that they had accelerated their progress toward degree completion by taking two courses simultaneously at least once, and therefore, they attended classes twice a week versus completing one course at time and attending class one night a week.

The qualitative results revealed:

1. There were 14 themes relating to how the ADP addressed the barriers to degree completion that the NTSs encountered. The top three aspects were (a) flexible course scheduling for those with busy schedules, (b) short accelerated classes and degree programs, and (c) how the ADP helped the

participants reach their goal of achieving a college degree. The participants stated that the ADP is tailored to the adult learners' needs, and the staff and program format increased their motivation to complete the course or degree requirements.

2. The textbook loan program was cited by half of the participants as an aspect that helped them with reduced expenses.

Implications of Findings

This research study mirrored, with some modifications for the NTSs and the ADP at the study site, a proprietary survey instrument used by Aslanian Market Research for a 2-year study, which produced a comprehensive report entitled, *Post-Traditional College Students: Attracting and Serving the New Majority* (Aslanian et al., 2017). The implications of the findings include:

1. Although the sample sizes differed—Aslanian Market Research surveyed a multitude of students who were attending a variety of colleges throughout the U.S. versus this study's one singular group of NTSs at a private liberal arts college in New York State—there are significant similarities within both sets of NTSs. The parallels include “motivation for enrolling in undergraduate study” is driven by “career transitions and career-related events” (Aslanian et al., 2017, pp. 7, 9- 10); “the acceptance of prior academic credits is critical” (p. 7); “age no longer predicts learning patterns” (p. 7); NTSs students are “cost-sensitive” (p. 7); and “preferred distance to travel to the institution of enrollment” is less than 10 miles (p. 7).

2. Colleges need to respond, nurture, and help prospective NTSs with the enrollment process. Both studies reflect how most NTSs enroll within 3 months of their first inquiry and “make their decision to enroll quickly” (Aslanian et al., 2017, p. 8), and most of the studies’ participants only considered one institution for degree completion.
3. Colleges need to educate potential NTSs about options regarding how to fund their education including supplying ongoing support with information regarding financial aid. The participants at this study site repeatedly referred to the attention, detailed information, and service they received from the representative they worked with during the admission process. The participants said they felt important and valued and that they were not just a number.
4. NTSs with some college are motivated to finish what they started.

Unlike the Aslanian et al. (2017) report, the principal factor for enrollment for this study’s NTSs was the flexible course schedule and not the cost of tuition and fees. The accelerated format, campus location, book loan program, and supportive staff and faculty, are key factors that attracted and supported the NTSs toward degree completion.

1. However, other areas of importance are remarkably similar to the Aslanian et al. (2017) report, such as campus location, reputation of the program or college, accreditation of the institution, and the fact that friends, family, or colleagues attended or had attended the college.
2. Although most participants at this study site favored the accelerated format of the course work (4-, 5-, or 6-week courses), many expressed a preference for

a minimum of 6 weeks for courses in their major area of study with the purpose of understanding and retaining more information. However, accelerated coursework, which allows for completing more courses and credits in a semester, was still preferred over the traditional-length semester. The participants of this study and of the ADP completed a full-time credit load (minimum of 12 credit hours and often 15 to 18 credit hours per semester) while taking one course at a time, because the semesters at the study site are 24 weeks (6 months) instead of the traditional 15- to 16-week semesters with part-time credits coupled with multiple night classes each week.

3. The participants suggested offering a combination of hybrid coursework and some online courses, but they specifically did not want all online coursework.

Limitations

One significant limitation of this study is that some of the quantitative data, such as age, income personal circumstances, and employment, occurred in a fixed moment in time. An expansion of this study could be to conduct a follow-up survey at different intervals within the students' attendance, and to conduct an annual survey with new students. Other limitations include how this study was conducted at only one school in one regional area that had a higher cost of living than the state average; therefore, economic factors may have influenced the salary expectations, which may not have been consistent with market conditions.

An expansion of the study would be to explore the intersectionality of societal classifications such as gender, income, occupation, and household structure, as they are

applied to the NTS population. Another limitation is the fact that the students had various levels of education and therefore were affected or influenced by earlier experiences. Last, the study was only conducted at one school with an accelerated-degree completion program.

I believe my positionality was also a limitation. Even though I was working in a different department of the study site when the survey was launched, the students of the ADP knew me through our contact during the admission process. But at the same time, I believe the level of candor and detailed comments the students provided demonstrated a level of comfortability and thus they were more open with their comments. Of the ADP participants, 15% later commented, in person or via email, that they had completed the survey and, as fellow NTSs, they were excited to support my doctoral journey. Many said that they looked forward to reading the research study.

Recommendations

Future research study would include a different group of NTSs at the same site to identify changing trends in the population. A study of the graduates of the ADP would also be of benefit. Uncovering the retrospective experiences of the ADP graduates and to find out if their expectations for degree completion and an increase in income were met or exceeded. Last, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted at another college with an accelerated degree-completion program in a different regional, national, or international area.

It is recommended to modify some of the self-rating questions of the Aslanian Market Research survey instrument that are subject to personal interpretation because the results limit the readers' understanding of the results. Areas for additional future research

include comparison of traditional undergraduates and the NTS completing the same program to measure satisfaction and learning outcomes. Questions to consider for further research:

- Do NTSs in an ADP learn and retain as much or more than a traditional student in a traditional program?
- Would traditional students be interested and successful in an accelerated degree-completion program?
- Would more working adults return to college if they received tuition assistance from their employer?
- Do completion rates of the NTSs with associate degrees differ from an NTS who begins the degree completion journey with a GED instead of a traditional high school education?

Institutions could respond to the verbalized needs of their ADP NTSs and create hybrid and online courses, offer courses with more flexible hours, and increase the availability of courses during the 6-month semester including Saturday as a choice. Institutions could provide and train added support staff to help with financial aid, financial literacy, career development, and academic support services that are aligned with the needs of the NTSs who typically have differing responsibilities such as employment and family obligations. It is suggested that institutions increase access to academic support services, such as the writing center, tutoring, and the library, by changing their open schedules to include dates and time that support the NTSs. Other support departments, such as financial aid, student accounts, and the registrar, need to

enhance their hours of operation and their understanding of the NTS to accommodate the for the needs of such NTSs.

To continue growing the ADP, the study site institution needs to aggressively increase local marketing efforts to attract students who are most likely to attend because of the unique accelerated program. Last, the study site institution could benefit from the successful and popular ADP format by expanding the current list of programs offered to include the degrees the NTSs were asking for, such as education, social work, nursing, and master's degrees in psychology, along with an MBA program. The NTSs at the study site enjoyed and appreciated the small and personal campus environment, and they repeatedly expressed how at home they felt there.

Conclusion

This study uncovered how active and enrolled NTSs with various responsibilities outside of college, including full-time employment and families, define persistence and success in an ADP at a northeast liberal arts college that has offered this program for 28 years. Furthermore, the participants of this study disclosed their experiences of the program and confirmed how the ADP addressed their barriers to degree completion. Although national statistics confirm that many NTSs enrolled in college and did not complete a degree, the participants in this study returned to college because of the unique accelerated degree-completion program that motivated them to finish what they started, to fulfill a lifetime goal, to advance their careers, or a combination of any of these reasons. These results support previous studies of successful degree completion by NTSs.

Institutions of higher education must prepare to meet this challenge, even if it means deviating from traditional procedures and standards (Wlodkowski, 2003). This study exposed how and why an accelerated degree-completion format is ideal for the NTS. The students' perspectives and experiences of the ADP at this institution reflect their satisfaction and progress toward degree completion while they balanced contrasting responsibilities. This study's findings support previous research about rising degree completion rates of NTSs and, in some instances, at a higher rate than traditional students, and this can be attributed to intrinsic motivation, persistence, learning-goal orientation, and full-time enrollment in accelerated degree-completion programs (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Mezirow, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003a). Participant 13 summarized this study in one sentence as they expressed how and why the program works for them, "The ADP gives me the opportunity to work on all of my goals at once while supporting myself AND earning my degree!"

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Appendix A

Letter of Permission from Private Liberal Arts College

May 17, 2018

Dear Nereida Quiles-Wasserman,

We are happy to collaborate with you and St. John Fisher College on the study of *Characteristics of Persistence and Success of Nontraditional Adult Learners enrolled in an Accelerated Degree Completion Program*.

The purpose of this letter (or email) is to verify that you have the preliminary permission of Concordia College New York to collect data from active students of the Accelerated Degree Programs (ADP) of the division of Adult Education. We understand that this will require you to survey the active ADP students. The College will work with you to develop a process to identify active ADP students to participate in this study.

The participation of Concordia College New York in this study is contingent upon your study being approved by the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College.

We look forward to working with you on this study,

Sincerely,

Provost

Appendix B

Sample Letter of Introduction and Invitation

Dear Accelerated Degree Program Student,

I am currently a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY studying for my doctoral degree in Executive Leadership. I am seeking your participation in my dissertation research on adult (non-traditional) college students.

I am in need of participants to complete an online survey between _____ and _____. This research seeks to gain information on characteristics of persistence and success of nontraditional adult learners enrolled in an accelerated program for degree completion.

I am attaching an Informed Consent Form to this letter. If you wish to participate, please read and sign the form indicating that you are giving consent to participate in the research study. The information you share will be kept confidential. After receipt of the signed consent form (attached), you will be assigned an indication code for the study and the data analysis will be kept anonymous in this work. Then a link to the survey will be sent to your Concordia student email. Completion of the survey will take 15 – 30 minutes.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board, IRB. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or email: xxx@xxx.edu

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Title of study: Characteristics of Persistence and Success of Nontraditional Adult Learners enrolled in an Accelerated Degree Completion Program.

Name of researcher: Nereida Quiles-Wasserman

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Janice Kelly Phone for further information: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to discover the characteristics of persistence and success of nontraditional students, adult learners, enrolled in an accelerated program for degree completion at a northeast liberal arts college. Additionally, this study will uncover the merits of the 11ths from the student's perspective.

Place of study: Concordia College-NY, Bronxville, NY

Length of participation: 15 - 30 minutes

Method(s) of data collection: Electronic data collection, survey instrument sent via email

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below: There are no expected risks. The benefits of conducting this study for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers include creating or enhancing new curriculum, services, improve recruiting efforts, and increasing enrollment, retention, and completion rates.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy of subjects: Survey participants and the survey results will be coded to protect the identity and confidentiality of the individual and focus on common themes.

Your information may be shared with appropriate governmental authorities ONLY if you or someone else is in danger, or if we are required to do so by law.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy of data collected: All survey results and files will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and

password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant)	Signature	Date
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Print name (Investigator)	Signature	Date
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If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher(s) listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your personal health care provider or a crisis service provider at (914) 925-5959.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact Jill Rathbun by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu. She will contact a supervisory IRB official to assist you.