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Perceptions of Internship Participation by Nontraditional Students Enrolled in Community College

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience from preenrollment to completion. While adult learning theory suggests that experiential learning is a good fit for nontraditional students, it is unknown to what degree nontraditional student characteristics interfere with their engagement in such, or if experiential learning improves nontraditional student persistence. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to understand the study participants' lived experiences of internship participation as well as how, if at all, situational or institutional factors impacted their internship engagement. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with four nontraditional students who had completed a semester-long, paid internship while enrolled in community college in the northeastern United States. Several themes emerged as commonly shared by the participants. All four participants demonstrated a focus on career attainment as well as multiple examples of interrole conflict. Online access, flexibility in scheduling, and personal support were identified as key factors in interrole conflict mitigation. In addition, the value of gaining workplace experience and perception of enhanced employability were found to supersede other potential benefits of internship participation, for example compensation or credit accrual, for each study participant. Recommendations for future research include an exploration of internship and academic programs designed specifically for adult learners as well as a cost-benefit analysis of such programs. Additional research regarding online delivery of internship programs and related services is also recommended.

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Perceptions of Internship Participation by Nontraditional Students Enrolled in
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By

Kathleen Ceng

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

Supervised by

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father. I felt your pride and excitement when I entered the doctoral program. I felt your regard for, and belief in, my writing skills. And, although you are no longer with us in body, I feel your utter joy at this accomplishment. This dissertation is, likewise, dedicated to my mother. Your special care and support of those you love is matched by no other. I also offer a special dedication to my husband—the first Dr. Ceng in our family but not the last! You ignited the spark that started this journey, and you stood by me every step of the way with support, encouragement, and inspiration. Heartfelt thanks to my family and friends who also inspired and encouraged me in many ways along this path. Lastly, I must acknowledge Dr. Smith and Dr. Rios. It is with thanks to you that I crossed the finish line. Your dedication to the St. John Fisher Ed.D. Program, the research process itself, and my successful completion are truly remarkable.

Biographical Sketch

Kathleen Ceng attended Purchase College, State University of New York, from 2006 to 2007 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2007. She attended Long Island University from 2007 to 2009 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in 2009. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2016 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Ceng pursued her research in nontraditional students' perceptions of internship participation while enrolled in community college under the direction of Dr. Carla Smith and Dr. Angela Rios and received the Ed.D. degree in 2021.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience from preenrollment to completion. While adult learning theory suggests that experiential learning is a good fit for nontraditional students, it is unknown to what degree nontraditional student characteristics interfere with their engagement in such, or if experiential learning improves nontraditional student persistence. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to understand the study participants' lived experiences of internship participation as well as how, if at all, situational or institutional factors impacted their internship engagement. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with four nontraditional students who had completed a semester-long, paid internship while enrolled in community college in the northeastern United States. Several themes emerged as commonly shared by the participants. All four participants demonstrated a focus on career attainment as well as multiple examples of interrole conflict. Online access, flexibility in scheduling, and personal support were identified as key factors in interrole conflict mitigation. In addition, the value of gaining workplace experience and perception of enhanced employability were found to supersede other potential benefits of internship participation, for example compensation or credit accrual, for each study participant. Recommendations for future research include an exploration of internship and academic programs designed specifically for adult learners as well as a

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When imagining the traditional college student experience, a picture often emerges of students attending college or university directly after high school, studying full time, and living on campus—free from family or work responsibilities while completing their education. Nontraditional students, by contrast, include anyone other than those individuals fitting neatly into the traditional college student picture. Nontraditional students are identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24 years, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time attendance, a single parent or having other dependents, financially independent from their parents, working full-time while enrolled, or not having received a standard high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). As such, nontraditional students include adults aged 25 years or older as well as young adult students under the age of 25 with adult responsibilities. As an adjective, the word “nontraditional” implies nonconforming or atypical, however, nontraditional students are anything but atypical (Gulley, 2016; Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Pelletier, 2010; Remenick, 2019). Higher education has seen an historical shift in enrollments, significantly altering the demographic of its student body (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Remenick, 2019). Studies suggest that the presence of nontraditional students in college classes has been a growing trend, which is evidenced by nontraditional students representing as much as three-quarters of the postsecondary student population (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019).

As postsecondary students with adult responsibilities, this group manages multiple roles as student, caregiver, and worker; therefore, they have differing needs than their traditional counterparts. Given that nontraditional students represent such a large portion of postsecondary enrollments, it is important for higher education to understand nontraditional students' unique needs (MacDonald, 2018). MacDonald (2018) stated that, "part of the responsibility instructors and schools face in enrolling large populations of adult learners is not only teaching the students how to persist and succeed, but to first understand themselves what the students' deficits and challenges are" (p. 162). According to Osam et al. (2017), the challenges faced by nontraditional students often relate to their multiple roles (situational barriers) and engagement with their postsecondary institution (institutional barriers). A brief description of situational and institutional barriers is provided in the following sections. A more detailed portrayal of these barriers is provided in Chapter 2.

Situational and Institutional Barriers

Situational barriers arise from the unique life circumstances of nontraditional students in light of their personal and financial responsibilities. These responsibilities include caring for children, parents, and/or partners; supporting an independent living situation; and maintaining full- or part-time employment. As such, time management is a key element of situational barriers. Balancing work schedules, classes, homework, childcare, travel, and overall household responsibilities can be difficult at best. At its worst, educational pursuits may be restricted if schedules conflict. Conflicting roles and schedules often lead to part-time enrollment status for nontraditional students (Kamer & Ishitani, 2020; Kasworm, 2018).

With regard to institutional barriers, Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) suggested that community college leaders must identify how campus conditions affect student success. In light of the situational barriers previously noted, nontraditional students often require access to college courses and services outside of regular business hours. To address this need, the availability of evening courses has become more common (Chen, 2017; MacDonald, 2018; Osam et al., 2017), but evening courses may not be available for all required courses, and they may not be offered in all departments within the college or university. Access to institutional services, such as advising, career counseling, and enrollment, is often more limited outside of regular business hours (Bergman et al., 2014; Chen, 2017; Osam et al., 2017). This limits nontraditional students' access to important supports and services as well as institutional personnel.

Both situational and institutional barriers have the potential to impact student persistence, identified as "continued enrollment" in any postsecondary institution, which, in turn, could impact degree completion for this large population. In their study, Kamer and Ishitani (2020) found that an increase in the number of students enrolled part time had a negative impact on graduation rates. Given the high number of nontraditional students and their link to part-time enrollments, negative graduation rates create a completion dilemma for postsecondary institutions. Understanding and mitigating these challenges could be of particular significance to community college administrators, as roughly two-thirds of community college students are classified as nontraditional (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018).

How Community Colleges Serve Nontraditional Students

With the creation of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 1965, many nontraditional students utilized the newly available federal financial aid to enroll in community colleges, given the colleges' low tuition and the ease of enrolling for part-time classes. This increased demand for classes led to the formation of over 600 community colleges between 1960 and 1984 (Remenick, 2019). Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) also referred to the rise in community college numbers during this time period, as well as their continued growth, resulting in the operation of approximately 1,000 2-year institutions in 2020.

Edenfield and McBrayer (2020), along with Ishitani and Kamer (2020), agree that community colleges have been uniquely suited to address the issues of postsecondary cost and access. This capability enables community colleges to serve a broad range of students, in general, but community colleges often attract underrepresented students in particular. Adult students lie within their classification of "underrepresented students." Kasworm (2018), too, pointed to the growth of community colleges over the past several decades as one of the many factors fostering adult access to higher education.

Nontraditional students enroll in postsecondary education for numerous reasons. Key among the reasons are career and financial advancement (Chen, 2017; Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). Degrees earned in 2 years or less prepare students to enter the workforce more rapidly than if they were to attend a 4-year college or university (Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Kamer & Ishitani, 2020), allowing students to meet their financial needs more quickly. Dikhtyar et al. (2020) noted that new skills acquisition or upgrading of existing skills through work-related training and continuing education are

necessary for adults to remain competitive in the labor market. Dikhtyar et al. (2020) added that community colleges are important sources of work-related training and education. Internships, among other high-impact practices, have been increasingly touted as valuable experiences for their contribution to career readiness (Hora et al., 2020a). Internships' increased incorporation into college curricula speak in part to higher education's focus on improving student outcomes (Hora et al., 2020a; Johnson & Stage, 2018; Sauder et al., 2019).

Experiential learning in the form of fieldwork, co-ops, and practicums are other examples of practices that provide opportunities for students to apply their classroom learning in real-world settings. Such practices are often required in career-oriented majors, as well as being offered for elective credit. According to The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017), in each year since 2013, at least 60% of students participated in an internship and/or co-op while enrolled in college. Higher education's increased use of these forms of experiential learning, coupled with the increased enrollment of nontraditional students in postsecondary education, suggests that nontraditional students have increasingly participated in these practices.

Relevance of Experiential Learning to Nontraditional Students

The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) defines experiential education as “a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (AEE, n.d., para. 1). There is a direct association between experiential learning theory and adult learning theory, which is also known as andragogy. The

Knowles (1972, 1978) theory of andragogy tells us that adults are problem-centered in their orientation to learning. One AAE (n.d.) principle emphasizes that learners should be actively engaged in investigation, experimentation, and problem-solving. Allen and Zhang (2016), Kasworm (2018), and Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017) all indicated that adult learners are intrinsically motivated. This motivation comes from a desire to better themselves, in some cases because of life changes. This desire necessitates skills and competencies development, whether professional or otherwise. Knowles (1972, 1978) identified this as readiness to learn and noted that it correlates to the developmental stages and roles that adult learners find themselves situated in at any given time. Although concern has risen that the many roles nontraditional students must juggle create obstacles to their success (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019; Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017), Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) suggested that higher education administrators view nontraditional students' differences as assets rather than detriments. Their strong alignment with experiential learning could be one such asset.

Problem Statement

Although access to postsecondary education has improved, significant gaps remain in student retention and degree completion (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). These gaps are, likewise and particularly, noted for nontraditional students. *Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data*, by Juskiewicz (2020), is the sixth issue in an annual series produced by the American Association of Community Colleges. One source of completion data analyzed in this report is that of the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), which tracks 6-year outcomes across all institutions attended by students. Tracking all institutions attended by students, rather than tracking just the initial

institutions attended by students, is important, given the percentage of students who transfer both in and out of community colleges. Analysis of the NSC completion data show that “an astounding two-thirds of students who attended exclusively part-time were no longer enrolled by the end of the 6 year window” (Juszkiewicz, 2020, p. 11).

Juszkiewicz (2020) noted that this withdrawal rate is nearly twice that of students who attended full time. Given that part-time attendance is one of the hallmarks of nontraditional student enrollment, identifying ways to improve their persistence could have a significant impact on their degree completions.

There is ample literature regarding student retention, success, and the efficacy of high-impact practices as they relate to 4-year institutions; however, there is little such research as it relates to community colleges (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). High-impact practices include practices such as internship programs. In 2020, approximately 1,000 public 2-year institutions were in operation in the United States, having enrolled over one-third of the nation’s undergraduate students, as measured in the fall 2017 semester (Kamer & Ishitani, 2020). This represents a significant gap in the understanding and application of student retention and success knowledge as it relates to the 2-year sector as a whole, and more specifically as it relates to experiential learning. Edenfield and McBrayer’s (2020) discussion of existing success and retention literature also notes that it tends to focus on student attributes rather than on institutional qualities. When considering institutional changes to improve student outcomes, these researchers suggested that it is critical to keep students’ perceptions and experiences at the center of planning.

It is well-documented that nontraditional student enrollment in postsecondary education has increased significantly, making up approximately two-thirds of community college enrollments, and that these learners have different needs than do traditional students. Accordingly, research has emerged regarding nontraditional students' needs in general (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021), the barriers they face (Osam et al., 2017), their perceptions of instructional needs (Newsham, 2019) and specialized programs (Esses, 2019), awareness of available services (Dikhtyar et al., 2020), and the influence of institutional characteristics on student success (Chen, 2017; Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; Kamer & Ishitani, 2020). None of these studies have focused on nontraditional students' experiences with internship participation.

A primary motivation for nontraditional students enrolling in community college is to prepare for career paths that lead to improved earnings for themselves and their families. As part of their career preparation, engagement in experiential learning in the forms of internships has presumably increased whether undertaken electively or to satisfy course requirements. However, nontraditional students' perceptions of their experiences with experiential learning has received little inquiry; therefore, it is unknown how nontraditional students experience participation in internships. While experiential learning aligns with the motivation and learning preferences of adult learners (Knowles; 1972, 1978), it is unknown whether those characteristics that identify them as nontraditional impede their participation in this important mode of learning. Given the number of nontraditional students who engage in such experiences as part of their degree attainment while enrolled in community college, this represents a gap in the literature.

Theoretical Rationale

Theoretical frameworks are an important structural component of literature reviews because of their ability to enlighten and guide research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This research was based on two theoretical frameworks, which were chosen for their alignment with the study's intent to better understand how nontraditional students perceive their participation in internship experiences. The first theory presented is adult learning theory. Adult learners desire a learning process that values their experience, recognizes their developmental maturity and life roles, and allows for hands-on learning. The second theory presented will be experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory provides an intellectual process for learning by doing. Both frameworks are rooted in adult development and emphasize the importance of knowledge being constructed through transactional activities. How adults learn, their motivations to learn, their expectations of learning, and the fundamental process of experiential learning all have a strong association with how nontraditional students experience internship engagement.

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles (1972, 1974, 1978) is best known for his theory of andragogy, which conceptualizes the ways in which adults learn. The Knowles (1974) theory grew from his work with organizations in the early 1970s. He was interested in the emerging understanding among organization leaders that organizational development was an educational strategy, and therefore grounded in theories of teaching and learning (Knowles, 1974). Knowles (1974) explained that the chief teaching and learning model used in Western culture was mechanistic. This model views the learner as passively receiving information from external forces, which was characteristic of most teaching and

training of the time. Knowles (1974) contrasts this model with the organismic model which, although existing since ancient times, had only recently begun to influence the Western educational system. This model views the learner as dynamic and active, continuously developing throughout their lifespan toward their full potential.

Knowles (1974) highlighted that Western schools, from elementary through postsecondary, rely on pedagogical practices. Pedagogy, derived from the Greek words meaning child and leader, translates to the art of teaching children as empty vessels (Knowles, 1974, 1978). Knowles (1974) noted that pedagogy persisted as the prominent educational framework, even as adult education was emerging. Therefore, educational programs designed for adults throughout academia, business, government, and volunteer organizations had not differed from those designed for children and adolescents. As a result, literature began emerging regarding adult educational practices, and andragogy became more prevalent in the early 1960s. Andragogy, derived from the Greek words meaning “man and leader,” therefore translates to the art of teaching adults (Knowles, 1974).

Andragogy is based on four key ideas that differ from pedagogy, here described (Knowles, 1972, 1978);

1. As we mature from childhood to adulthood, we move from a state of dependence to independence, thereby making adult learning more self-directed.
2. As we mature, we also broaden our experience. Where experience is assumed to be of little value to children, adult learners’ experiences serve as a rich source for learning.

3. Readiness to learn relates to developmental needs and societal roles. Knowles (1972) stressed the importance of learning coinciding with adults' roles as employees, spouses, organizational leaders, etc.
4. Adults have a problem-centered orientation to learning, which differs from the content-centered orientation to learning of children.

According to Knowles (1972), innovations in teaching have led to an appreciation of a learning process that honors all sources of knowledge, including knowledge gained through individuals' interactions with their surroundings. The mechanistic model of teaching and learning focuses on content transmission, whereas the organismic model provides greater flexibility, emphasizing competency development. This process aligns with experiential learning, changing the focus from teaching to learning, with experience being the catalyst for development as opposed to simply training as the catalyst for development.

Experiential Learning Theory

Seminal theorists often cited in discussions relating to experiential learning are Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984). Dewey (1938) described traditional education as static, in where the learning process takes information and skills building that have been accepted in the past and imposes them on the next generation. In this sense, the learner receives information in an organized and passive manner. By contrast, Dewey (1938) placed the process of experience and learning within the social context of living. He believed that the principles, themselves, are abstract, and they only become concrete in their application and the resulting consequences of those applications. As such, learning

is an ongoing transactional process between people and their environments (Dewey, 1938).

Experiential learning theory (ELT) “was created to provide an intellectual foundation for the practice of experiential learning, responding to Dewey’s call for a theory of experience to guide educational innovation” (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 10). ELT synthesizes the works of numerous foundational scholars in the fields of human development and learning including, among others, Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Jung, and Rogers, to cultivate a holistic model of the experiential learning process and adult development (Kolb, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Kolb’s (2005) theory includes six propositions that he identified as shared among these scholars.

1. Learning should be comprehended as a process rather than regarded in terms of outcomes. This process must include feedback on the efficacy of student learning.
2. All learning is relearning. Students are called upon to examine and test their beliefs by integrating them with new ideas.
3. The learning process requires students to move between reflection and action as well as between feeling and thinking.
4. Learning is not merely a cognitive result but also the result of a person’s full adaptation to the world around them.
5. Learning is the synergetic process of one interacting with their environment.
6. Learning is constructed rather than transmitted.

ELT states that knowledge is the result of both comprehending and converting experience (Kolb, 2005). This process is distilled into a learning cycle where concrete

experiences are reflected upon. These reflections encourage abstract thinking and theories from which new inferences emerge. These inferences are tested, and these test results function as a guide for cultivating new experiences. As such, curriculum should be designed to encourage students to move systematically along this continuum. Given that experiential learning theory is a holistic theory, Kolb (2005) was not surprised that research on this subject transcends disciplines, relating to learning and educational concerns in numerous disciplines.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experiences. This research sought specifically to discover how nontraditional students conceptualized their experience from preenrollment to completion of a semester-long internship. The objective of collecting this data is to contribute to the existing literature relating to this research topic. Currently, ample research exists regarding nontraditional students and student experiences with internship participation as discrete topics. The research performed at the intersection of these two topics is scant. In light of the nearly doubled attrition rate for part-time students, an enrollment status common among nontraditional students, it could be important for college administrators to learn if participation in internships has an impact on persistence for nontraditional students. This information could be of particular interest to community college administrators given the high percentage of nontraditional students enrolled in the 2-year sector. As previously noted, situational and institutional barriers can impede persistence amongst nontraditional students. As such, this study focused on both the nontraditional students' life situations

and their interactions with their respective institutions. Internships taken as either elective credit or required for degree completion were considered.

Research Questions

This study sought answers to these research questions:

1. How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experiences?
2. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?
3. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?

Potential Significance of the Study

There are a number of societal benefits that stem from cultivating a college-educated adult population, including lower poverty, unemployment, and incarceration rates (Barbera et al., 2020), as well as increased civic engagement and the creation of a skilled workforce which can be competitive in the global marketplace (Barbera et al., 2020; Bergman et al., 2014). Kamer and Ishitani (2020) stated that such societal issues are often linked with college completion initiatives both nationally and locally, adding that such initiatives are commonly denoted as the “completion agenda” (p. 1). These researchers also noted that certain policy initiatives relating to the completion agenda have focused specifically on public, 2-year institutions over the past decade, on both a national and state scale.

The *2012–17 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* (NCES, 2019) is a nationally representative survey covering first-time students’ experiences over 6 academic years. The information provided in this report includes persistence and completion rates. For first-time students beginning at a public 2-year institution, 46.3% were no longer enrolled at the end of the study. This jumped to 78% for students whose attendance was always classified as part-time. Degree completion, or lack thereof, has an economic impact on the student and society as a whole. There is agreement that adult learners play an essential role in both the growth and stability of the U.S. economy (Barbera et al., 2020; Bergman et al., 2014). Although nontraditional students can significantly contribute to postsecondary persistence rates, degree completions, and economic expansion, their high attrition rate (Bergman et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019) negatively impacts their ability to do so.

Comparatively little is known about factors that influence nontraditional student persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). It is widely theorized that the adult responsibilities of nontraditional students, which make them differ from their traditional counterparts, create barriers to degree completion. Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) and Osam et al. (2017) both suggest the importance of postsecondary administrators viewing nontraditional students’ differences as assets rather than seeing them through the lens of barriers. As an example, Osam et al., (2017) discovered that situational factors may temporarily impede educational advancement for adult learners; however, situational factors may also increase the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment in the first place. Understanding the factors that positively and negatively impact nontraditional students’ persistence to degree completion is imperative as higher

education endeavors to improve outcomes for this student population. Identifying and analyzing the confluence of positive and negative factors, rather than just their distinct influences, could serve to deepen such understanding. As previously stated, this understanding could be of particular importance to community college administrators, given the high percentage of nontraditional students enrolled in this sector.

Definitions of Terms

Adult learners – students who are 25 years of age or older. This definition is consistently used interchangeably with “nontraditional students” in related literature.

Andragogy – term derived from the Greek words meaning “man and leader,” Knowles (1974) defined andragogy as the art of teaching adults. The Merriam-Webster (2011) dictionary defines andragogy as “the art or science of teaching adults.”

Internship – “a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting” (NACE, 2021, para. 6). “The internship plan generally involves students working in a professional setting under the supervision and monitoring of practicing professionals” (King’s College, 2021, para. 1). Other terms used to identify internships in this study include “work-integrated learning” and “work-based learning.”

Interrole conflict – a type of discord “that occurs when individuals have multiple roles and the expectations and behaviors associated with one role are not consistent with the expectations and behaviors associated with another “ (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2015, para. 1).

Nontraditional students – learners identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24 years, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education,

part-time attendance, being a single parent or having dependents, being financially independent from parents, working full-time while enrolled, and did not receive a standard high school diploma (NCES, n.d.c). This definition is consistently used interchangeably with “adult learners” in related literature.

Persistence – continued enrollment or degree completion at any institution.

Chapter Summary

Nontraditional students are no longer seen as an atypical category in higher education. In fact, they are more representative of higher education’s student body today—especially among community college enrollments. Despite this fact, research has historically been focused on traditional students in 4-year college settings (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). Given their adult responsibilities, nontraditional students manage multiple roles. Roles outside of school often impact their role as students, and those roles can negatively influence their persistence to degree completion (Osam et al., 2017). One characteristic common to nontraditional students, which has shown to significantly diminish persistence to degree attainment in community college students, is part-time enrollment status (Juszkiewicz, 2020; NCES, 2019). As 2-year postsecondary institutions develop college completion initiatives in response to the completion agenda, nontraditional students are poised to have significant bearing given their significant presence in community colleges.

Nontraditional students often enroll in community colleges to advance their careers. Studies by Gault et al. (2018) and Wagner and Strach (2019) suggest that participation in work-based learning improves employability outcomes. Participation in internships and co-ops has increased in postsecondary education such that approximately

two-thirds of students surveyed had participated in an internship or co-op every year since 2013 (NACE, 2017). Enrollment of nontraditional students in higher education has also expanded in postsecondary education (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019); therefore, it is likely that nontraditional students have increasingly engaged in internship experiences. In spite of this, it is unknown how nontraditional students perceive such experiences. While adult learning theory suggests that experiential learning is a good fit for nontraditional students, it is unknown to what degree nontraditional student characteristics interfere with their engagement in such or if experiential learning improves nontraditional students' persistence to degree completion.

To address these questions, the literature regarding the role of community colleges and the ways in which they serve nontraditional students are examined in Chapter 2. Research regarding situational and institutional barriers experienced by nontraditional students are also surveyed. In addition, multiple studies regarding internship and practicum experiences are analyzed. There is limited research regarding the experiences of nontraditional students who have engaged in internship experiences. It is important to discover how nontraditional students conceptualize their internship experiences (Hora et al., 2020b), to identify ways in which these practices can be utilized to improve persistence and degree completion outcomes. In an effort to begin filling this gap in the literature, this study focuses on nontraditional students' perceptions of their experiences upon the completion of a semester-long internship.

A preview of the research included in Chapter 2 is referenced earlier. Chapter 3 provides a detailed plan of the research methodology including the research context, the participants, the instruments used in this study, and the data analysis. The results of the

research are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the implications of the findings and recommendations based on the analysis of the data collected.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

An examination of college completion data between the years 2010 and 2018 illustrates the significantly negative impact that part-time enrollment status has on educational persistence (Chen et al., 2017; Juskiewicz, 2020). This impact could be of particular importance to community colleges. According to Juskiewicz (2020), students with part-time enrollment status represented 64% of community college enrollees in the fall 2018 semester. Part-time enrollment status is one of the characteristics that identifies nontraditional students, thereby placing this student population at high risk of withdrawal. Situational and institutional barriers that stem from other nontraditional student characteristics also lead to attrition for this student population (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Troester-Trate, 2020). Identifying institutional solutions for the lack of persistence among nontraditional learners is, therefore, essential for community college leaders.

Student engagement has been found to be a key predictor of student success; however, nontraditional students are less likely to engage with resources and activities outside of the classroom because of barriers such as employment and responsibilities at home (Troester-Trate, 2020). High-impact practices, such as internship participation, have been increasingly incorporated into college curricula as a means to improve student outcomes (Hora et al., 2020a; Johnson & Stage, 2018; Sauder et al., 2019). Although experiential learning through internships would be a good fit for nontraditional students, given their life experience and learning process, nontraditional students, just as with

campus resources and activities, experience barriers to their engagement in this mode of learning (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017). Understanding how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges experience the phenomenon of participating in an internship may assist faculty and administrators in developing innovative experiential learning pedagogies that would improve student engagement and, therefore, persistence for nontraditional students.

The purpose of this literature review is to logically organize and synthesize the research that provides insight into the phenomenon being examined. The research is presented in three overarching categories relating to how nontraditional community college students experience internship engagement: (a) the role of community colleges, (b) the barriers faced by nontraditional students in their educational pursuits, and (c) perceptions of internship engagement. The importance of student engagement to student development and persistence is both discussed and related to nontraditional students in this chapter's discussion of nontraditional student barriers.

Role of Community Colleges

As this research study examines nontraditional students enrolled specifically in community colleges, it is important to understand the position that community colleges hold in the higher education landscape and the relevance of that position to nontraditional learners. The creation of community colleges surged in the mid-20th century, ultimately expanding their number to 1,050 institutions in 2020 (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). These institutions play a vital role for a wide array of students. They groom underprepared and at-risk students, support student transfers to baccalaureate programs, serve adult learners returning to school as well as those seeking new skills and training

(Dikhtyar et al., 2020; The Learning Alliance, 2003). Community colleges are able to offer such flexible educational opportunities, given their open-access policy, convenient locations, and low tuition. It is this access that makes community colleges of particular interest to nontraditional students, among other student populations (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; Ishitani & Kamer, 2020).

While community colleges share the characteristics of open access and low tuition, Ishitani and Kamer (2020) stressed that, “research providing practice and policy recommendations concerning these colleges must acknowledge and account for differences in their missions and curricular emphases” (p. 647). These researchers postulated that institutions with differing curricular emphases would allocate operational expenditures differently. Noting 2-year institutions serve millions of Americans, Ishitani and Kamer sought evidence that would link institutional characteristics, expenditures, and efficiency to graduation rates. Their quantitative study focused on 3-year graduation rates utilizing data obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) on 840 public 2-year institutions. Institutional graduation rates were averaged over 3 years to allow for potential spikes isolated in any given year.

Multiple regression analyses were performed to estimate the relationship between the dependent variable (graduation rates) and the independent variables analyzed (institutional characteristics, expenditures, and efficiency). Increases in institutional support service expenditures and a proportion of full-time students were associated with increased graduation rates at High Transfer Colleges and Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical Colleges. Carnegie Classifications (2017) for associate colleges, introduced in

2015, distinguish degree-granting 2-year institutions in three categories: High Transfer, High Career & Technical, and Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical.

High Transfer colleges offer 75% or more of their awards in the liberal arts and sciences. High Career & Technical colleges offer 75% or more of their awards in professional, career, and technical disciplines. Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical colleges fall between these two extremes. The Ishitani and Kamer (2020) study found that a larger number of nontraditional students was associated with improved graduation rates at High Career & Technical colleges. This finding is consistent with the literature, given that one key reason for nontraditional students to enroll in postsecondary education is for career attainment or advancement (Chen, 2017; Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021).

Community colleges serve an important function in workforce development (Dikhtyar et al., 2020; The Learning Alliance, 2003). Two-year institutions have been providing critical job training to both traditional and nontraditional students for over 50 years (Grover & Miller, 2018). In addition, community colleges work closely with employers and policy makers to identify and support labor market needs (Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Grover & Miller, 2018). Such collaboration results in the development of preservice training, in-service training focused on specific aspects of job performance, and professional development upon which local employers rely. Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) referenced the significance of employers' reliance upon institutions through the lens of student attrition. They stated that low college completion rates are problematic not only for students seeking financial advancement but for millions of employers who are dependent upon an educated and skilled labor pool. Given the pressure on community

colleges for their contribution to workforce and economic development, student persistence is of great significance.

The Community College Persistence Problem

Juszkiewicz (2019) authored a report on community college enrollment and completion trends for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). This report is distinct from Juszkiewicz's 2020 report referenced in Chapter 1. Data utilized in the AACC report was gathered primarily from the IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey. When analyzing student characteristics, age was found to be associated with a trend of potential significance. Traditionally aged students (up to and including age 21 years) were the only age group where full-time enrollment exceeded part-time enrollment. Students were more likely to be enrolled part time for every other age group, each of which would include nontraditional students. Further, considering the enrollment trends of traditionally aged students, the report anticipated that part-time enrollments would likely become greater for this age group as well. As noted in Chapter 1, the student characteristic of part-time enrollment status significantly impacts persistence at community colleges.

Markle (2015) indicated that the significant body of scholarly literature relating to nontraditional students rarely studied persistence among this group. She conducted a mixed methods study to examine the factors that influenced persistence among a sample of nontraditional students attending a large public university in the southeastern United States, over a 3-year period. The quantitative portion of the study examined how demographics, academics, and situational variables impacted persistence. The qualitative portion of the study examined students' reasons for either withdrawing or staying enrolled, as well as their suggestions for institutional support. A total of 494 students

completed an online survey. Of the total surveys completed, 60% of the respondents attended their institutions full-time. Approximately one-third worked full-time while enrolled, and over half worked part-time while enrolled. The majority of respondents (81%) had children under the age of 18 living at home; 15% identified as single parents.

The Markle (2015) survey included both closed and open-ended questions. When respondents answered affirmatively to closed questions, open-ended questions appeared in order to collect additional data. Independent sample *t* tests and logistic regression were used to explore the differences in persistence and the factors influencing persistence. Open coding was utilized to identify and compare concepts until they were well defined. Approximately one-third of the nontraditional students in the study experienced moderate levels of interrole conflict; 43% experienced high to very high levels of interrole conflict. Interrole conflict stems from conflicts between either family and school demands or work and school demands. More than one-third of the respondents considered withdrawing from school. Men were more likely to cite financial concerns as the reason for withdrawing, while women were more likely to cite interrole conflict as the reason for withdrawing (Markle, 2015).

Of the nontraditional students who had considered withdrawing, 63.2% ultimately did not. In describing why they persisted, women were more likely to reduce their course load or work hours to accommodate their schooling. Women also referenced the meaning that degree completion held for them; signaling that they were capable, productive, and deserving of respect. Men were more likely to obtain tuition reimbursement and flexibility in their employment hours to accommodate school. Other reasons for degree completion for nontraditional students included career advancement and increased

earning potential (Markle). Regarding what services institutions could provide to reduce stress, suggestions included expanded course offerings, increased access to faculty, and improved student advising. Women also suggested affordable child care on campus. Ultimately, the Markle (2015) study found that there was no significant difference in persistence between men and women. There were, however, gender differences among the factors influencing persistence, some of which are noted above.

Although the Markle study was conducted in a 4-year institution, the findings have implications for 2-year institutions as well. As noted in Chapter 1, approximately two-thirds of community college students are classified as nontraditional (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). Markle (2015) noted that one objective of her study was to better understand the barriers that nontraditional students encounter in degree completion, and what enabled them to overcome those barriers. To further this understanding, additional studies are presented.

Barriers Faced by Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students are identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24 years, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time attendance, being a single parent or having other dependents, being financially independent from their parents, working full-time while enrolled, or not receiving a standard high school diploma (NCES, 2015). These characteristics may create obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. Osam et al. (2017) performed an integrative literature review of the challenges faced by adult learners in their educational endeavors. In their review, these researchers categorized barriers in the same way as Ekstrom (1972): situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers are described as

constraints arising from personal finances as well as obligations that nontraditional students have to their families and communities. Institutional barriers are described as operational factors, that is, curriculum adoption as well as educational policies and practices. Dispositional barriers are described as characteristics specific to individuals, such as fear of failure and intellectual attitudes (Osam et al., 2017). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be placed on situational and institutional barriers. These barriers are discussed in greater detail.

Situational Barriers

Troester-Trate (2020) examined how non-academic issues impacted student retention and persistence at a community college in upstate New York. The purpose of her study was to evaluate the relationship between certain non-academic services and community college student retention and persistence. Troester-Trate focused on services relating to food insecurity, transportation, and childcare needs, noting that these barriers have the potential to significantly impact student success. Troester-Trate (2020) stated that nearly 40% of community college students are classified as nontraditional. She added that a significant number of nontraditional students identified as single parents; an assertion echoed by Peterson (2016). Peterson also posited that the majority of community college students are categorized as low income. As such, they often must work full- or part-time jobs to support both their families and their college attendance. This employment while attending college categorizes these students as nontraditional.

Low-income students are often transportation disadvantaged (Troester-Trate, 2020). They utilize vehicles that may not be dependable, they get transportation from family or friends, or they use public transportation. Each of these may be unreliable

modes of transport. Likewise, the role of caretaker often interferes with college attendance. Parent students, who do not have adequate childcare, must either bring their children to classes or they skip classes. These students are less likely to persist when compared with students who do not have children. In response to these obstacles, the subject community college in Troester-Trate's (2020) study developed a support program that provided a food pantry, transportation assistance, and childcare assistance. Students were selected for enrollment in the support-program based upon faculty or staff referral, indicating that the students were at-risk of withdrawal caused by life circumstances.

Troester-Trate (2020) performed a quasi-experimental correlational study to determine the relationship between the aforementioned non-academic barriers and student persistence for at-risk students enrolled in the support program, compared to students not identified as at-risk and therefore not enrolled in the support program. Quasi-experimental studies differ in some ways from controlled experiments; however, cause and effect relationships can be inferred from their data. The study sample consisted of 90 students, divided equally into two groups of those enrolled and not enrolled in the support program in the fall 2016 semester. In addition, the two sample groups were matched on numerous demographic characteristics.

De-identified archival data were utilized to test the hypothesis that retention and persistence would be improved for students who received one or more support service from the program. An ANOVA statistical test was conducted to test the relationship between the support services and retention and persistence. Study results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in persistence between the two groups, which Troester-Trate (2020) identified as an important finding given that the group

enrolled in the support program should otherwise have exhibited lower persistence rates, due to their at-risk status. This indicates that the support program was effective in equalizing persistence, despite obstacles faced by the enrolled students.

Also interested in student persistence, Peterson (2016) studied community college student parents in a qualitative study seeking to understand the lived experiences of nontraditional student parents persisting to an associate degree. Utilizing IPA, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 participants. Each participant had a child who had not yet entered kindergarten. The IPA revealed four themes that illustrated the students' mindset toward persistence: support (financial, familial, institutional, peer), methods for addressing stress, strategies for study and parenting, and self-awareness (positive mindset). Participants utilized different methods relating to each of the themes to support their persistence. Peterson (2016) summarized their shared phenomenon: "an internal resolve to be proactive, to plan for success, to face challenges and turn them into opportunities, and to daily renew their commitment to the goal of completion" (p. 379).

Peterson's (2016) findings were supported by studies referenced in her review of related literature. The review suggested that nontraditional students needed information to assist them with stress management as they endeavored to balance work, school, and home responsibilities. She suggested that these multiple responsibilities can overwhelm students, highlighting the importance of planning and coping strategies. Without support to manage this stressful balancing act, some students determine that the pressure and resulting anxiety are not worth persisting. Markle (2015), Peterson (2016), and Remenick (2019) all highlighted the importance of support services personnel and faculty being

knowledgeable about the demands on nontraditional students as well as accommodations that were needed to support them.

Institutional Barriers

Remenick (2019) noted that although policies throughout history have led to greater numbers of nontraditional students entering higher education, their perseverance is not guaranteed. She performed a historical literature review to identify services and supports that have bolstered nontraditional student persistence in the past, so that postsecondary administrators could consider their implementation in the present educational contexts. Remenick identified many of the barriers faced by nontraditional students as institutional and structural. A number of student service departments exist that are well positioned to provide the support needed by students balancing multiple responsibilities. They include academic advising, counseling services, career services, and financial aid offices; however, despite institutions having an increased awareness of diverse student needs, these offices continue to largely maintain regular business hours on weekdays only. In addition to expanding access to these key offices, Remenick (2019) indicated that offering clubs and organizations beyond regular business hours had positive outcomes.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2009) also identified student peer group interactions and extracurricular activities as important programmatic efforts. The desire for this by nontraditional students was also noted by Osam et al. (2017). Flexibility in course offerings was also beneficial. Specific examples offered were evening and weekend courses provided in convenient locations by community colleges as well as online courses that students could access and complete at any time of day. MacDonald (2018)

and Remenick (2019) both suggested that institutions conform to nontraditional students' unique life circumstances, rather than forcing them to conform their lives to the institution. While expanding physical access to clubs and services beyond normal business hours was recommended, Remenick (2019) also stated that services could be brought to students in their homes or workplaces via virtual live chats. She emphasized that these recommendations should be considered for faculty and classes as well—rather than just for student services.

Adding to the discussion of supports and services that have been shown to improve nontraditional student persistence, Levin and Garcia (2018) and Scrivener et al. (2015) examined the impact of a program launched by the City University of New York (CUNY), which was designed to increase degree completions as well as the speed to degree completion for participating students. Recognizing the low percentage of community college students who complete an associate degree in 3 years, particularly for students needing developmental courses, CUNY launched the Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP) in 2007. In contrast to short-term reforms, the program was designed to address multiple barriers to student success for up to 3 years. While the program requires full-time enrollment, Levin and Garcia (2018) stated that the services provided to program participants remove barriers to full-time study. Scrivener et al. (2015) described those services as specialized advising, enhanced career and tutoring services, block courses, use of free textbooks, and financial assistance for tuition and transportation.

The Scrivener et al. (2015) examination, which commenced in 2009, was conducted by a random assignment study of the program in three CUNY community

colleges. Three years of results were presented. The sample size included 896 participants. Students were randomly assigned to an ASAP program group or a control group that received standard college services. The groups were matched in terms of educational preparedness, academic major, and demographic characteristics. Overall, the ASAP participants were more likely to enroll full time, complete developmental courses, and persist to degree completion. The 3-year summary report shows that 40% of the students enrolled in the ASAP program had received a degree, compared to 22% of the control group students. The number of students transferring to a 4-year college was also increased by approximately 50%. Additional costs to administer the program were estimated at \$16,300 per student. However, the cost per graduate decreased significantly given the substantial increase in degree completions.

Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) performed a qualitative and explanatory multiple-case study to examine what institutional conditions community college students perceived as contributing to their success. Institutional conditions were defined as campus environment and institutional agents. Institutional agents included faculty, staff, and administrators. Success was defined as identifying and making progress toward educational goals. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 participants, equally divided between two campus locations of a public community college. Students at both campus locations identified three themes that fostered their educational goals. The first theme was institutional characteristics. This included smaller campus and class sizes, affordability, proximity, and diversity among students and staff. The second theme was an environment conducive to learning. This included active learning strategies, availability of support services, and availability of institutional agents. The third theme,

which the researchers identified as the most impactful to emerge, was meaningful interactions with institutional agents. Components of this theme related to faculty, staff, and administrators acting as advocates, resources, and support systems.

Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) linked their findings to previous research, as referenced herein. In studies they reviewed, students at community colleges were found to prefer smaller class sizes because they facilitated student engagement (Gabovitch, 2014). Additional study findings suggested that active and collaborative learning, as well as classroom-based problem solving, were tied to positive gains in student achievement (Kuh et al., 2007). Students feeling that their learning was improved when material was presented in a way that was relative to their lives and interests was another supported finding (Clark & Mayer, 2011). While the researchers acknowledged that the findings may not be transferable, given the small sample size, they suggest that community college administrators can use the findings to develop or improve relationships between their students and institutional agents.

Relevance of Nontraditional Student Barriers to Student Engagement

Seminal researchers in the field of postsecondary student engagement include Alexander Astin, Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terenzini, and Vincent Tinto. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory has five general postulates.

1. Involvement is defined as the investment of both physical and mental energy.
2. Involvement occurs on a continuum, which changes based on time and objects.
3. Involvement can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4. Student learning in any educational program is directly proportional to both the quantity and quality of student involvement.
5. The effectiveness of any education practice or policy is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement.

Astin (1984) challenged college administrators to reconsider their preoccupation with fiscal resources and consider that student time may be the most precious institutional resource. According to Astin, frequent interaction between students and faculty is more strongly related to college satisfaction than any other type of student involvement, student characteristic, or institutional characteristic. Faculty must, however, be aware of and monitor the time and energy that students are devoting to the learning process. In addition, Astin (1984) suggested that maximizing student involvement would involve student services personnel playing a more prominent role in institutional operations.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2009) also noted the frequency and quality of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom as an important factor. They stated that such interaction is positively linked with student persistence and degree attainment. They also noted the importance of course-taking patterns, actively involving students in the teaching-learning process, and the extent to which institutional structures facilitate students' academic and social engagement.

Reflecting on student persistence, Tinto (2017) identified three key dimensions of student motivation. The first dimension is self-efficacy. Students' belief in their ability to succeed influences the effort they expend on goals, tasks, and challenges. The second dimension is sense of belonging. Students must engage and see themselves as part of the college community to persist toward degree completion. The third dimension is

curriculum. Students' persistence is influenced by their perceived value of what and how they are learning. When considering the overlap in these seminal researchers' scholarship, it is evident that the greater the students' college involvement, the greater their academic and personal development.

Many scholars referenced in this literature review agree that student engagement is a vital element of student success (Barbera et al., 2020; Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; McCarrell & Selznick, 2020; Troester-Trate, 2020). Barbera et al. (2020) found that both academic and social engagement reduced the risk of students dropping out in 4-year institutions. Their principal finding directly connects student engagement with student persistence. Troester-Trate (2020) had a similar finding but noted a limitation for nontraditional students. She states that, "across the literature, it has been found that student engagement is a key predictor of students' success and nontraditional students have been found to report lower levels of engagement than traditional students" (p. 610). She stated that nontraditional students are less likely to engage in resources and activities outside of the classroom because of factors such as employment and responsibilities at home. This may put them at higher risk for withdrawal.

The previous discussion of situational and institutional barriers faced by nontraditional students demonstrates the numerous obstacles they encounter with student engagement. Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) noted Tinto's (2010) argument that knowing why students leave is not equivalent to knowing why students stay and succeed. The studies presented thus far have examined factors that promote student persistence and success through the lenses of student behaviors and mindset, and institutional elements. It is not well known how barriers impact internship participation by

nontraditional students, nor how they overcome such barriers. As such, studies relating to internship participation by nontraditional students are explored.

Internship Engagement

The relevance of experiential learning, which includes internships, to nontraditional students was introduced in Chapter 1. Adult learners have a problem-centered orientation to learning. They are motivated by professional skills development and a desire for learning that relates to real-world contexts. This relevance was established in sections of this literature review that are related to nontraditional student barriers and student engagement. McCarrell and Selznick (2020) found a high correlation between items associated with active learning and community college student engagement. Likewise, Edenfield and McBrayer (2020), Pascarella and Terenzini (2009), and Tinto (2017) highlighted that active and collaborative learning has a positive impact on student achievement.

In addition, Peterson (2016) suggested that opportunities to experience and practice decision-making and problem-solving could improve confidence and contribute to both stress reduction and improved time management among student parents. Caza et al. (2015) also posited that experiential learning increases confidence and career readiness skills such as time management. They suggested that students transition more confidently into the world of work with the knowledge that if they have performed successfully before, they can do so again. Internship engagement directly aligns with all of the above. Therefore, this mode of learning may contribute to increased persistence of nontraditional students if made readily accessible to this student population (Edenfield &

McBrayer, 2020; McCarrell & Selznick, 2020; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2009; Peterson, 2016; Tinto, 2017).

Hora et al. (2020b) pointed to a growing body of research that demonstrates the widespread use of internships in the United States, based upon their contribution to student engagement and completion. In their literature review, these authors observed a focus on the quality of internships and noted a lack of studies that delved deeply into how students, themselves, conceptualize their internship experiences. Hora et al. emphasized the importance of understanding students' perceptions for multiple reasons, one of which is particularly salient to this research study. They stated that understanding how students interpret their experiences can help administrators cultivate programs that are both positive and effective. Obtaining student insights about strengths and weaknesses can also inform teaching and advising.

In addition, Hora et al. (2020b) stated that the understanding of internship use in higher education is limited in other ways. Among these ways, they noted that little is known about internship programs in 2-year institutions or the nature of barriers impeding internship participation, particularly for underserved student populations. Hora et al. (2020a) conducted a concurrent mixed-methods study in the spring 2018 semester in conjunction with three postsecondary institutions. Quantitative data was collected from 1,129 students via an online survey. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were employed in the analysis of the survey data. Qualitative data was collected from 57 students via focus groups. Open coding was performed to analyze the focus group data. Intercoder consistency supported the reliability of these findings (Hora et al., 2020a).

Students who had not engaged in an internship ($N = 797$) were asked if they had been interested in doing so. Of the 797 students, 64% ($n = 509$) stated that they had been interested but were unable to engage in an internship for multiple reasons (Hora et al., 2020a). The most common reason cited for preventing internship participation was the need to maintain paid employment (58%). The second most common reason preventing internship participation was a heavy course load (52%), and the third was lack of internships offered in their field (42%). The two issues identified most frequently as barriers in the focus group were compensation and scheduling. Students noting compensation as a barrier were unable to find a paid internship that would afford them to leave their paid employment. Lei and Yin (2019) also noted the cost to students of unpaid internships as a drawback of internship participation. Students who noted scheduling as a barrier were unable to find an internship with hours that did not conflict with time available for study, personal or family obligations, or paid employment.

Routon and Walker (2019) posited that the increased time demand of internship participation during college often leads to students reducing credit loads or taking time off from college study to complete an internship experience. As such, Routon and Walker implemented a multiple-treatment propensity score-matching strategy to approximate the effects of tenure gaps and internships on college students. Their control group, therefore, was made up of students who had not participated in an internship and did not have any voluntary gaps in their college tenure. The researchers utilized a merged dataset compiled from The Freshman Survey (TFS) and College Senior Survey (CSS). Both surveys are administered by the Higher Education Research Institute. The dataset included undergraduates who earned their bachelor's degree between 1994 and 2006. In total, their

sample comprised 442,091 students who attended 619 four-year institutions (Routon & Walker, 2019).

To better approximate the effects of college internships, Routon and Walker (2019) utilized student data in four categories: interns with continuous college tenure ($N = 123,703$), interns who broke college tenure to intern ($N = 25,230$), non-interns with college tenure gaps ($N = 32,841$), and non-interns with continuous college tenure ($N = 260,000$). Students who participated in an internship without a tenure gap were more likely to be satisfied with their overall college experience and they were shown to graduate with higher average grades. While Routon and Walker's (2019) findings might appear intuitive, the methodology employed by the researchers supported their conclusion that,

Although internships are being championed widely due to their generally positive effects, if they are combined with a gap in course progression, the overall positive effects on within-college outcomes are notably smaller, and in some cases mixed or simply less certain (p. 398).

Routon and Walker (2019) recommended additional study that would be more representative of other institutional types, such as 2-year institutions.

Also recognizing the difficulties that nontraditional students encounter with experiential learning, Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017) conducted a case study of a pilot program in New York State, designed specifically to provide adult learners with experiential learning opportunities. Eight participants were enrolled in a weekly course in which students alternated classwork with experiential learning in a community organization (10 to 15 hours per week). The purpose of the program was to provide

students with hands-on experience that was flexible enough to work with their schedules. The program was evaluated as a quality improvement measure, using group discussion and student interview data. Content analysis identified themes that illuminated the students' experiences. Written feedback from student evaluations was also analyzed.

The first theme identified by Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017) related to class meetings. Students felt that individual time spent with instructors was more helpful than the group meetings, as they were more easily scheduled. The second theme suggested that students desired more time within the organization site, as opposed to time spent in group meetings. Third, students identified the written assignments as too open ended and they recommended added structure. Fourth, the students valued the experiential learning and felt it was more beneficial in ways than their classroom learning. Based on this feedback, the course was replaced with an independent study, written assignments were enhanced with added structure and direction, and another community-based experience was developed.

While not quantified, Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017) stated that student interest in the program multiplied, leading to the development of a larger program. Based on their study, these researchers offered several recommendations when developing an experiential learning program for nontraditional students. First, working with community-based organizations is helpful as they often have adaptable hours and flexible projects. Second, create opportunities outside of the classroom to foster social learning through peer interaction. Third, develop semi-structured learning activities to foster student autonomy. Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017) also recommended the use of

online platforms, noting that asynchronous activities allow time for student reflection, while synchronous chats allow for real-time interaction.

Along these lines, the efficacy of skills development in online social work education was examined by Wilke et al. (2016). Although this topic has been met with resistance, due to the hands-on nature of skills-based education, the researchers noted increased use of online clinical training by social work educators. Such online courses were, however, untested. To address this, Wilke et al. conducted a quantitative study at Florida State University in which they examined students enrolled in face-to-face ($N = 74$) and asynchronous online ($N = 78$) clinical social work classes. The purpose of the examination was to compare clinical assessment and intervention skills development by students in each course delivery mode. All sections of the course were developed and taught by the same instructor.

Skills development was assessed through two assignments: an assessment and treatment plan of a fictional case (mid-semester), and a digitally recorded role play (capstone project). Student grades on these assignments were translated into quality points, which were used as a continuous variable. Independent sample t tests were utilized to compare the continuous data of each group. A chi-square test was utilized to assess for racial and gender differences. An ANCOVA was utilized to assess for course delivery mode differences on student outcomes. Overall, Wilke et al. (2016) discovered that there were no statistically significant differences in student scores on either assignment between the face-to-face or online delivery modes. While this study did not assess students' perceptions of the online clinical experience, it suggests that students

may attain the same level of academic development should they choose this mode of learning.

The body of literature relating to students' experiences with internship participation often focuses on 4-year institutions and does not clearly distinguish between traditional and nontraditional student participation. Zilvinskis (2019) stated that internships are often evaluated through the lens of upper-class students, which may explain the focus on baccalaureate students. Literature related to the research problem is further limited in a number of ways. During the literature review process, this researcher noted significant attention was paid exclusively to students' perceptions of career-readiness attainment from internship participation. Conversely, little attention was noted with respect to students' perceptions of internship engagement leading up to and including enrollment (researcher observation). Such information could inform higher education administrators' understanding of student access to internship participation. Hora et al. (2020b) noted that data collected regarding student perception was largely focused on internship quality, and it did not delve more deeply into how students conceptualized their internship participation. Further, Sisselman-Borgia and Torino's study (2017) was predicated on the need specifically to identify best practices for internship and experiential learning participation by adult learners.

Multiple studies regarding nontraditional student barriers, personal and institutional behaviors that help students overcome those barriers, and the usefulness of internships have been analyzed within this literature review. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were all presented for consideration. Three key impressions emerged from this analysis. First, education policies, practices, programming, activities,

facilities, and teaching approaches should all be designed to promote student interaction with their peers as well as with institutional agents (Edenfield & MacBrayer, 2020; Markle, 2015; Peterson, 2016). Astin (1999), Pascarella and Terenzini (2009), and Tinto (2017) positively linked these efforts with student development and persistence.

Examples of such include smaller class sizes; specialized programs; improved access to courses, faculty, and student support services; and active learning. The positive influence of these factors on nontraditional student persistence was demonstrated throughout the studies discussed.

Second, financial assistance was shown to improve student persistence. This was evidenced in the form of childcare assistance, transportation assistance, and tuition assistance (Peterson, 2016; Scrivener, et al., 2015; Troester-Trate, 2020). Given that Hora et al. (2020b) showed that financial hardship impeded internship participation; postsecondary administrators may wish to consider offering financial assistance for this important learning activity. Lastly, the benefits of engaging students via online platforms was presented by Remenick (2019), Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017), and Wilke et al. (2016).

Additional qualitative studies relating to these three areas would result in more nuanced phenomenological data being added to this research topic. This research study adds phenomenological data related to the impact of situational barriers and institutional behaviors on internship participation by nontraditional students. It also highlights how financial need and online access were expressed in the data.

Chapter Summary

This literature review presented scholarly research relating to nontraditional community college students' perceptions of internship engagement. This research was categorized into three areas: the role of community colleges, the barriers faced by nontraditional students in their educational pursuits, and perceptions of internship engagement. Due to their open access, affordability, and convenient location, community colleges provide a broad range of both academic and workforce development to a large number of nontraditional students (Ishitani & Kamer, 2020). However, 2-year institutions are facing a completion crisis. As a result, community colleges need to not only consider access but also evidence of student success when planning continuous improvement (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020).

It is well documented that nontraditional students who attend community colleges have different needs (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; Ishitani & Kamer, 2020). Their needs stem from the multiple roles they must take on, including student, caregiver, and employee. Challenges faced by nontraditional students, in light of their multiple roles, are characterized as situational and institutional. Situational barriers arise from students' life circumstances. They may be caring for children, parents, or other family members. They often work to support their household and educational costs. Balancing school, employment, and household responsibilities leads to time management stressors that can lead to student withdrawal. Institutional barriers relate to student access to classes and critical student support services. Nontraditional students often require evening and weekend courses as well as expanded access to college offices such as the registrar,

advising, and career counseling. Such availability is largely limited, diminishing nontraditional student engagement.

Numerous studies have linked student engagement with student persistence. When analyzing factors that lead to student persistence, active and collaborative learning emerges as having a positive impact. Active and collaborative learning is also associated with improved self-confidence, enhanced time management, and stress reduction. In addition, experiential learning aligns strongly with nontraditional students' learning preferences and motivation. As such, internship engagement could be a useful tool in contributing to nontraditional student persistence. It also contributes to career readiness, which should be of importance to nontraditional students seeking new or advanced employment. However, it is unknown how nontraditional students experience internship engagement. Chapter 3 discusses the phenomenological methodology utilized in this research study to better understand how nontraditional students enrolled in a community college located in the northeastern United States perceived their internship participation.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Given the substantial number of both nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary education (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019) and postsecondary students participating in internships (Hora et al., 2020; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017; Routon & Walker, 2019), it stands to reason that a considerable number of nontraditional students participate in internship engagement. The literature suggests that forms of experiential learning, such as internship participation, contribute to student achievement (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020; Hora et al., 2019), align with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1972, 1978), and have a positive impact on postgraduation wages (Ortiz & MacDermott, 2018). Chapters 1 and 2 established the relevance of all of these findings to nontraditional students. As previously noted, nontraditional students make up the majority of student enrollments in the 2-year institution sector in particular.

This qualitative study explored how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceived their internship experiences from contemplation through completion. It is essential to understand nontraditional students' experiences with such participation, given the challenges they face while pursuing postsecondary education as referenced in the literature (Markle, 2015; Peterson, 2016; Troester-Trate, 2020). Challenges noted by these researchers relate to the often-conflicting roles of student, parent, and employer. Thus, the weight of home, school, and work responsibilities often

results in both situational and institutional barriers for nontraditional students. These barriers can impede their access to academic and nonacademic programs as well as important student services (MacDonald, 2018; Osam et al., 2017; Remenick, 2019). These barriers contribute to the high attrition rate of this student population (Bergman et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019). Although experiential learning aligns with nontraditional students' learning preferences and has been found to improve student engagement, it is unknown if the barriers that nontraditional students encounter likewise impede their access to this mode of learning. Conducting a qualitative study with nontraditional students who have participated in an internship during their community college enrollment would begin to address a significant gap in the literature regarding this research topic. In addition, it may assist postsecondary administrators in developing innovative pedagogies that are better suited to nontraditional student learners.

This study's research questions were informed by the problem statement, by a review of related literature, and by the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. In consideration of these guiding tenets, the following research questions were established for this study:

1. How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience?
2. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?

3. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized IPA, a research approach influenced by Smith (2011). This approach allows researchers to explore the lived experiences, in detail, of the research participants (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2017). A key theoretical touchstone for IPA is phenomenology. Phenomenological studies attempt to understand individuals' perceptions and perspectives of a particular phenomenon, as well as how they make meaning of their perceived experiences. Creswell (2013) stated that the essence of a phenomenon can be understood by describing what the participants have in common when experiencing it. Alase (2017) described the phenomenological approach as providing in-depth descriptions and interpretations of how the research participants' experience of the phenomenon being studied has impacted their lives. In this case, the phenomenon being examined is internship participation by nontraditional students while enrolled in a public, 2-year institution. As previously noted, how this population experiences their access to successful internship participation is not well studied. Belotto (2018) suggested that a qualitative approach is fitting when essential variables pertinent to a particular subject of inquiry are not yet known.

Returning to IPA, specifically, Smith (2011) discussed the characteristics of a good IPA research paper. The paper should have a clear focus and strong data, most often derived from rich narratives obtained during the interview process. The paper should also be rigorous. This is achieved by supporting the prevalence of the identified themes with

participant extracts. Extracts should also be selected for their ability to demonstrate convergence or divergence, another characteristic of good IPA. Further, a good IPA paper must allow for elaboration of each theme, rather than simply providing a superficial presentation. Emergent themes are further analyzed to identify superordinate and subordinate themes, which is expanded upon in the data analysis discussion found later in this chapter. Likewise, interpretive analysis, rather than just descriptive analysis, is also paramount. For example, interpretive commentary should follow each extract. Smith (2011, 2017) described this as an interpretive process that endeavors to make sense of the participants as they are making sense of their experience. Finally, the paper should be carefully written so that the readers are engaged by the narrative and feel that they have gained detailed information of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon being examined.

Research Context

This study took place at North East Community College (NECC), a pseudonym, located in an urban area of the northeastern United States. NECC operates two main campuses as well as multiple satellite and instructional centers. Data regarding the institution were retrieved through College Navigator (NCES, n.d.a). Awards offered at NECC include associate degrees as well as certificates that can be earned in less than 1 year. The college's website lists 20 programs leading to Associate in Arts (A.A.) degrees, 47 programs leading to Associate in Science (A.S.) degrees, and 45 certificate programs. College Navigator data revealed a total enrollment in the fall 2019 semester of 11,352. With respect to attendance status, 64% of students attended part-time. Given this statistic, approximately 7,200 students would be identified as nontraditional based on enrollment

status alone. This number is likely greater when additional nontraditional student characteristics are considered.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Carnegie Classification (2017) for associate colleges was introduced in 2015, and it distinguishes degree-granting, 2-year institutions in three categories: High Transfer, High Career & Technical, and Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical. At the time of the study, the Carnegie Classification (2017) for NECC was High Transfer. High Transfer institutions present 75% or more of their awards in the liberal arts and sciences. Institutional research data available on NECC's website provides additional demographic data. Student age ranges from 14 to 79 years, with an average age of 26 years. Women make up 60% of student enrollment. With respect to race/ethnicity, of the total enrollment, 27% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 20% identified as Black or African American, 15% identified as White, and 20% of the total enrollment identified their race/ethnicity as *Unknown*. All other races were identified at rates of 10% or lower.

NECC was selected as the study site because of its ability to inform the research study. NECC established a program in 2012 that places students in paid internships. This program, supported with funding from a regional nonprofit organization, has grown since its inception to now serving over 150 students per year. Entities that partner with the college's paid internship program include top corporations, nonprofit, small-business, cultural, and civic organizations in the greater city area. According to program documents provided by NECC's Internships and Career Development department, compensation for the internships is \$18–\$55 per hour, and participating students also receive a travel stipend of up to \$500. To be eligible for this program, students must be enrolled in a

minimum of two courses, which includes a 3-credit internship course. Eligible students must be actively seeking a degree or certificate and will have ideally completed 12 credits prior to enrollment. No GPA requirements exist for eligibility. Students wishing to participate in the program utilize an online platform to create a profile and apply for internships of interest. NECC staff are available to assist students in this process.

Research Participants

The study population for this research was nontraditional students who had engaged in an internship while enrolled in NECC. Purposeful sampling was employed, as the participants had been deliberately selected for their capacity to inform the research study. As the goal of IPA is to examine and analyze specific experience, data were obtained from a purposive, homogeneous sample (Smith, 2017). Thus, all participants had knowledge of, or perspectives related to, the phenomenon being studied.

Accordingly, the participants invited to join this study met a pre-established set of criteria. They (a) were currently enrolled or previously enrolled at NECC, (b) identified as a nontraditional student, and (c) completed an internship while enrolled. Four participants joined this study. Alase (2017) characterizes IPA as well suited to conduct a “thick descriptive” research study (p. 13). Given the thick description and homogeneous study population, Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that IPA studies should be conducted on relatively small sample sizes.

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both St. John Fisher college and NECC, the director of internships and career development at NECC identified students who had completed internships within the past 2 academic years. The director emailed the students for the sole purpose of introducing them to the study. The

researcher’s introduction letter (Appendix A), demographic form (Appendix B), and consent form for adult participants (Appendix C) were attached to the email. These documents stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential. To ensure confidentiality, students interested in participating contacted the study researcher directly. The completed demographic form was utilized to determine participant eligibility.

Initial participant recruitment yielded two study participants. A follow-up email was sent by the director, which yielded one additional participant. Snowball sampling was employed by the study researcher, in the case that the three study participants could assist in identifying other potential subjects. This effort resulted in the identification of the fourth study participant. The records of this study are kept private to protect the participants’ confidentiality. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and to the study location.

Sample student demographic data collected from the NECC Office of Institutional Research webpage is presented alongside study participant demographic data in Table 3.1. Table 3.2 highlights study participants’ nontraditional student characteristics. More detailed participant profiles are provided in Chapter 4 to inform data analysis.

Table 3.1

Selected NECC Student and Study Participant Demographic Data

Demographic	NECC	Study participant
Enrollment status (while at NECC)	Part time: 65% Full time: 35%	Part time: 25% Full time: 75%
Gender	Women: 60% Men: 39%	Women: 50% Men: 50%
Average age	26	27
Age range	14–79	22–33

Table 3.2*Study Participant Nontraditional Student Characteristics*

Nontraditional student characteristic	Allen	Melanie	Emma	Steven
Over the age of 24 while enrolled	X	X	X	–
Delayed enrollment in postsecondary education	–	–	–	X
Part-time attendance	–	X	–	–
Single parent/having dependents	X	X	–	–
Financially independent from parents	X	X	X	–
Working full time while enrolled	–	X	–	X
Did not receive a standard high school diploma	–	–	–	–

Instruments Used in Data Collection

According to Smith (2011), “IPA requires an intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts derived from participants” (p. 10). Toward this end, the most common method of data collection in IPA is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2011, 2017). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks participants a series of questions that are both predetermined and open-ended. Predetermined questions ensure that the same core information is elicited from each participant. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their experiences and perceptions in detail. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the flexibility to follow areas of interest that may develop (Belotto, 2018). As such, the researcher is the key instrument, collecting data through the participant interviews. Given the lack of a validated questionnaire, the interview questions were designed by the researcher based on the study’s established research questions, theoretical frameworks, and review of related literature. Content validity was established through the process of a peer review. A

colleague who, at the time of the research, had experience mentoring doctoral students in qualitative research, as well as teaching adult learners in a degree completion program, reviewed the interview questions. The purpose of this review was to provide feedback regarding the interview questions clarity as well as the ability of the researcher to retrieve data that would address the study's research questions. Based upon this feedback, no changes were made to the interview questions.

Procedures for Data Collection

Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and conducted remotely via Zoom, a cloud-based videoconferencing service. Archibald et al. (2019) examined the use of Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection. Their study focused on the perspectives and experiences of both researchers and participants. Both groups agreed that Zoom was a useful method of conducting interviews, with the majority of participants preferring Zoom over other interview methods. In summary, Archibald et al. found that the advantages of utilizing Zoom (efficiency, convenience, cost savings) outweighed potential challenges (difficulty building rapport, lack of digital literacy, technical difficulties). Despite the potential challenge of technical difficulties, the researchers noted that overcoming technical issues together led to rapport building between researcher and participant.

Upon opening the link to access the Zoom interview meeting, the participants were required to authorize the recording of the interview. The researcher began the interview by confirming receipt of the demographic form and the informed consent form. As the interviews were recorded, notetaking was limited to noting nonverbal cues, so that the interviewer was free to ask probing and clarifying questions. The interviews may

have felt conversational but they were purposely informed by the study's research questions. Upon completion of the interview questions, the participants were reminded of the researcher's contact information should they have any questions or concerns. The participants were also reminded that they might be contacted for a follow-up interview if there was a need to clarify responses. All of the participants received a \$25 Visa e-gift card for their participation in the study.

Procedures Used for Data Analysis

The Zoom videoconference recordings were saved to the Cloud and automatically transcribed. Each transcription was identified by the pseudonym given the interviewee. The researcher immersed herself in the interview transcriptions, rereading them multiple times. Following the coding process recommended by Alase (2017), a four-step process was utilized to identify emergent categories and themes:

1. Read interview transcripts multiple times to develop a sense of the participant's mindset and how the phenomenon, internship participation, has affected their life. The first reading, or readings, of each interview transcript were conducted while simultaneously watching the interview recording, in order to ensure the accuracy of transcription.
2. During the first level of coding, meaningful chunks of sentences or statements within participant responses were highlighted. Through this process, key words or phrases were utilized as in vivo codes, or open codes were assigned.
3. During the second level of coding, the chunks of data identified during the first level of coding were further condensed, moving closer to the core essence of the lived experience.

4. During the third level of coding, the condensed data identified during the second level of coding were further narrowed into categories expressed by just one or two words.

In addition to the coding process utilized above, coding was performed utilizing Quirkos qualitative software. Quirkos allows researchers to drag and drop data from each participant's transcript into bubbles that can be assigned codes as well as colors. Bubbles grow larger as more data is included, visually representing code frequency. A graphic representing the code frequency identified in Quirkos is provided in Appendix D. Participant demographic data can also be input, which allows for cross-participant comparison by specific demographics. Where code agreement was realized in this supplemental coding process, code consistency was demonstrated. Data analysis was refined by instances where new ways of conceptualizing or articulating the data were experienced. During the process of qualitative research, Smith (2011) explained that initial categories are modified as they are tested by subsequent data. He further stated, "the method is recursive and iterative so one can revisit previous assessments in the light of new experience" (Smith, 2011, p. 16).

Superordinate and subordinate themes were derived from the categories identified in Quirkos. Superordinate themes are broad or overarching categories expressed by all participants. Subordinate themes are concepts that are narrowed down from the broader categories. Analysis was then conducted across the participants to distinguish patterns, as well as areas of agreement and disagreement among the participant experiences. These categories and themes are presented in Table 4.1. The research questions they speak to are noted in the table.

In an effort to establish intercoder consistency, an independent qualitative researcher coded the first transcript concurrently with the study researcher. Intercoder consistency is achieved when multiple coders demonstrate a constancy in responses when analyzing research data (Creswell, 2013). Both researchers discussed the themes, which they independently identified, to discover areas of overlap or divergence. This analysis determined that the independent researcher's interpretations aligned with the study researcher's core themes.

Trustworthiness was established in multiple ways in this research and analysis. The participants had all experienced the phenomenon being examined. The in-depth interview questions allowed for detailed responses which fostered detailed descriptions. This researcher also utilized thick descriptions when explaining the research process. Creswell (2013) stated that the use of thick description by the researcher when describing the settings, participant profiles, etc., allows readers to assess the transferability of the findings based on characteristics they may have in common. Member checking was also performed. This was achieved through follow-up communication with the study participants. Reliability was also established as intercoder consistency was demonstrated.

Positionality

As previously noted, the researcher in this study was the key research instrument. The researcher was a nontraditional student while completing her postsecondary degrees. In addition, the researcher formerly administered an internship program in the academic unit she oversaw in a public 4-year institution. "The issue of researcher membership in the group or area being studied is relevant to all approaches of qualitative methodology as the researcher plays such a direct and intimate role in both the data collection and

analysis” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Researcher membership is often characterized in binary terms as either an insider or outsider. Insiders have shared experiences, roles, or characteristics with their participants. They therefore have close knowledge of the research context. Insider status can be beneficial, as it can enhance the breadth and depth of researchers’ understanding of the population they are studying as well as the participants’ responses. It does raise concerns, however, about objectivity and authenticity of results (Bourke, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

When researchers, themselves, are the research instrument, their subjectivity is likely to have some bearing on the research process and the findings. Bracketing and reflexivity are two important tools to address these concerns. The researcher can easily introduce assumptions or confuse their own experiences with that of their participants. This highlights the need for researcher bracketing, which is achieved by temporarily setting aside one’s own assumptions. In discussing bracketing, Creswell (2013) also recognized the benefits and concerns relating to positionality and suggested that the researcher determine how and in what way their personal perceptions will be introduced into the study. With respect to IPA, specifically, Alase (2017) stated that the only time in which bracketing must take place is when designing and conducting interviews. Reflexivity is the awareness of the biases that may impact the research process (Bourke, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). It was vital for this researcher to engage in a continuous process of self-conscious awareness throughout the research study.

Chapter Summary

The intent of this study was not to generalize the experiences of the participants to all nontraditional learners in the same context. The goal of IPA research studies is

transferability. In transferability, “the researcher’s job is to provide detailed descriptions that allow readers to make inferences about extrapolating the findings to other settings” (Polit & Beck, 2010, p. 1453). As such, the consumer of the research determines if, and under what contexts, results are transferable. This chapter described the qualitative methodology utilized to understand the lived experiences of nontraditional students engaging in internship participation while enrolled in a public, 2-year institution. The IPA research approach, research context, participants, data collection, and data analysis methods were all described in detail. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 connects the qualitative data to previous research and explores recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Developing a college-educated adult population fosters societal benefits such as reduced poverty, unemployment, and incarceration rates (Barbera et al., 2020). One of the key motivations for nontraditional students to enroll in postsecondary education is career and financial advancement (Chen, 2017; Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). Research studies show that internship participation by college students can increase the likelihood of obtaining employment upon their graduation as well as positively impact their starting salary (Gault et al., 2018; Guarise & Kostenblatt, 2018). Forms of experiential learning, such as internship participation, are a good fit for nontraditional students, given their alignment with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1972, 1978). However, it is unknown if situational and institutional factors create barriers to nontraditional students' participation in internships as they persist in their education (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017).

Nontraditional students are identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24 years, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time attendance, a single parent or having other dependents, financially independent from their parents, working full time while enrolled, or not having received a standard high school diploma (NCES, 2015). As adults, or young adults with adult responsibilities, the demands associated with the many roles they fill can impact their educational advancement. The literature consistently demonstrates that nontraditional students

represent the majority of postsecondary enrollments (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). As such, the high attrition rate of nontraditional students (Bergman et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019) can negatively impact their ability to contribute to postsecondary persistence rates, degree completions, and overall economic growth. Conversely, the ability of this student population to contribute to these societal goals might be improved through increased understanding regarding how nontraditional students experience internship participation, as well as how such participation could be leveraged to improve nontraditional student persistence. This research study addressed the gap that exists in the literature relating to nontraditional students' participation in internship experiences.

This qualitative study examined nontraditional students' perspectives regarding their internship participation while enrolled in community college. The study explored how, if at all, situational and institutional factors impacted internship participation by this student population. Situational and institutional factors are noted in this study in the same way as by Osam et al. (2017), who drew upon the early research of Ekstrom (1972). Situational factors are defined as life circumstances such as familial, residential, financial, and personal. They relate to the conflicting roles often associated with nontraditional students, that is, caregiver, employee, student. Institutional factors are defined as institutional practices and policies, curriculum planning, and student services (Osam et al., 2017). Both factors can create barriers to nontraditional student persistence in postsecondary education (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Troester-Trate, 2020).

IPA was employed in this study for its usefulness in detailed exploration of the lived experiences of those who have engaged in the phenomenon being examined (Alase,

2017; Smith, 2017). As described in Chapter 3, purposive sampling is a key component of phenomenological studies. Researchers develop an understanding of the essence of a phenomenon by examining commonalities amongst those experiencing it (Creswell, 2013). This chapter presents an analysis of the qualitative data collected from four nontraditional students who completed internships via the paid internship program while enrolled at North East Community College (NECC). IPA demands rigorous qualitative analysis of the detailed narratives extracted from participants. As such, semi-structured, in-depth interviews are commonly used for data collection (Smith, 2011, 2017) and were therefore utilized for data collection in this study. Additional discussion of the utility of IPA to this study can be found in the Data Analysis and Findings section of this chapter. In compliance with St. John Fisher's IRB guidelines, due to COVID-19, participant interviews were conducted online utilizing Zoom videoconferencing software.

Participant 1 – “Allen”

At the time of his interview, Allen identified as a 33-year-old Asian male. Allen reported that he is married and has an elementary school-aged child. He referred to himself as an adult learner who had been out of school for a long time, as well as a “career switcher.” Upon graduating high school, Allen reportedly spent a semester at a 4-year institution but did not do well, as he believed he was too young for the experience. When he learned he was going to be a father, he realized the need to get a job with good benefits. He enjoyed welding class in high school and was good with his hands, so he went on to trade school to become a welder. He secured an apprenticeship and worked his way up as a tradesperson. When Allen became unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he explained that he enrolled in a medical technology program. When he

determined that was not a good fit, he enrolled at NECC as a full-time student to follow his true passion, music performance and music education. He is currently working part-time while enrolled at NECC. Upon degree completion, he plans to transfer to a 4-year institution.

Participant 2 – “Melanie”

At the time of her interview, Melanie identified as a 28-year-old Hispanic or Latinx female. Melanie reported that she is a single parent of an elementary school-aged child. Although previously enrolled as a part-time student, she is currently enrolled in NECC as a full-time student. She stated that she also works full-time while enrolled in school. Melanie first enrolled as a business major, as she really wanted to own her own business. However, early in her business program coursework she realized that she “wasn’t really passionate about that.” Melanie recognized that she really liked science and began working in the healthcare field for a health insurance company. At that time, she became interested in nursing. She did not want to go all the way through her business program and realize in the end, once she had her job in business, that she didn’t want to be doing that. At that time, she changed her major to complete her education in nursing. Melanie plans to transfer to a 4-year institution to continue her studies in nursing upon graduating NECC.

Participant 3 – “Emma”

At the time of her interview, Emma identified as a 27-year-old Hispanic or Latinx female. She reported that she is and was married with no children while attending NECC. Prior to coming to the United States, Emma studied tourism in Spain which she describes as very popular due to the number of tourists and tourism agencies there. Once in the

United States, Emma experienced what she describes as “culture shock” and decided to change careers. Upon considering her likes and strengths, she decided to pursue an academic program in management. She recently graduated from NECC and is currently enrolled in a 4-year institution to continue her studies in management. Her enrollment status at NECC was full-time. Emma stated that she worked part-time while attending school, although not through the entirety of her degree completion. For some time during her enrollment, she also volunteered at a community agency. She is enrolled as a full-time student in her current institution.

Participant 4 – “Steven”

At the time of his interview, Steven identified as a 22-year-old Asian male. He reported that he is unmarried with no children and lived with family while attending NECC. Steven comes from a family of immigrants, for which education was “the biggest thing.” He indicated that he and his family members were always pushed to do well in school and get a college degree. Upon graduating high school, Steven reported that he enrolled in a 4-year institution. He withdrew a week into the semester, however, as the institution choice was not a good fit. The commute was also problematic, taking him 2 hours each way via public transportation. He stated that he attended another 4-year institution the next semester, which again was not a good fit, and he ultimately enrolled at NECC. While there, Steven reportedly majored in business, was enrolled as a full-time student, and worked full-time as well. He recently graduated from NECC and is currently enrolled as a full-time student in a 4-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree in business.

Research Questions

This chapter presents the findings from this study, derived from the following three research questions:

1. How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience?
2. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?
3. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?

Data analysis and findings are presented below. The findings are organized by research question and discussed in terms of how they did or did not answer the related question.

Data Analysis and Findings

As a qualitative research approach, “IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 9). Throughout the analytical process, the study researcher was attempting to make sense of the participant’s experience as the participant was making sense themselves of their internship involvement. This is referred to as a double hermeneutic process (Miller et al., 2018; Smith, 2011). Miller et al. (2018) further explained this as an interpretive process, in which researchers consider data through the broader lens of cultural, societal, or theoretical frameworks.

Links to this study’s theoretical frameworks will be presented in the findings. Each participant interview was examined individually, followed by cross-case analyses to identify patterns. Ultimately, IPA is interested in convergence and divergence among the sample, while also identifying how shared themes are encountered differently by study participants (Miller et al., 2018; Smith, 2011). Given the interpretive nature of this process, extensive raw data (i.e., participant excerpts) is provided to support themes and frameworks presented in the findings.

The findings are organized by the research questions that guided this study. Analysis of the findings is organized and discussed in alignment with the categories, superordinate themes, and subordinate themes summarized in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Categories, Superordinate Themes, and Subordinate Themes

Category	Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
Career attainment (RQ1)	Value of experience	Key internship benefits
Interrole conflict (RQ2)	Scheduling and time management	Personal support
Institutional engagement (RQ3)	Internship programming	Career exploration

Research Question 1

How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience?

Category: Career Attainment. The concept of acquiring employment in a field of interest and/or to support financial stability emerged as a consistent and overarching category across all the participants as they conveyed their personal experience. It was observed in both their reasons for participating in an internship and how they experienced the internship itself, which is displayed in the discussion of the superordinate and

subordinate themes within this category. One of the main assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1972, 1978) is that learning moves from a product of biological development to that of the developmental skills that are increasingly required as one matures. Knowles (1972, 1978) explained this process as moving from what children should know, based upon their biological and academic needs, to what adults *need to know*, based upon their societal roles as spouse, worker, parent, etc.

The interview questions for this study were designed to inquire about each participant's decision to attend college, prior to inquiring about their decision to participate in an internship. This was designed for the researcher to get to know the participants on a broader level as nontraditional learners, as well as to understand how, if at all, each decision was related to their career goals. The study participants shared how their lived experiences led them to, and informed, their internship participation. As adults with adult responsibilities, or preparing to take on adult responsibilities, they all articulated a focus on career attainment. When asked about his decision to attend college, Allen stated:

Out of high school . . . I'd basically gone to a trade school for welding when I found out that I was going to be a father. I was looking for something that I was good at . . . and welding was one of the subjects that I took to, that I enjoyed, so I decided I would take that path. It was never really something . . . that I really wanted to do. It felt like a necessity. I needed to go to work, get a job with benefits.

Allen described welding on multiple occasions throughout the interview as something he needed to do at the time to provide for his family. However, he also frequently stated that welding was not what he wanted to do long term.

What I always wanted to do . . . as long as I could remember, was something around music or music education, music performance. It was just something that I was still doing . . . playing music, playing in bands, going to music workshops. This is, like, what I always wanted. This is what I should be doing.

When Melanie was asked about her decision to attend college, a similar emergence of self-awareness led to a change in major:

I decided to attend because I really, at first, I was so sure that I wanted to be a business major, and I really wanted to own my own business. But then halfway through, once I was taking . . . Business 101 . . . I realized I wasn't really passionate about that. And, although I do love math, I feel like I really like science, and then I started working in the healthcare field. I was working for a health insurance company at the time, and then I realized, I really want to do nursing.

Emma's decision to attend college was also the result of a change in career choice, however, it unfolded differently in her case. She conveyed her change of major through the lens of cultural differences between Spain, where she had grown up, and the United States, where she now lives.

When I arrived in United States, I realized that culture is different from Spain. In Spain, I studied tourism, which is very popular. We have a lot of tourists there, a lot of hotels, a lot of touristic agencies. Once I end up in the United States, I saw

that culture shock, and then decided to change career path. I thought, what I'm good at? What I like to do? I am well organized, I like to manage, I like control and leadership. I decided to pursue management.

With the emphasis that Steven's family placed on earning a college degree, attending college had always felt like a given. In addition, he believed that it was a societal expectation.

As we're growing as a society, college degrees . . . not even an associate degree, just a bachelor's degree or even higher, like a master's . . . those are expected from a lot of places of employment. So, not having one, I would say . . . would deter me from being able to get the job that I want. Or at least a well-paying career or well-paying job. I would feel, like, societal pressure.

Across all four participants, a distinct pattern emerged. Career attainment served as a function of supporting their financial independence and societal roles. Three of the four participants were observed to shift toward a career choice that aligned with their interests. As previously noted, adult learning theory links societal roles to adult learners' motivation to learn (Knowles; 1972, 1978). Further, Knowles (1978) stated that personal interests also act as motivation to learn. Therefore, motivation to learn, a cornerstone of adult learning theory, is influenced by both need and interest. While career attainment served the function of supporting an independent living situation for Allen, Melanie, and Emma, they all placed personal interests at the center of career choice either initially, when presented the opportunity to change, or both.

Superordinate Theme: Value of Experience. As noted in Chapter 1, outcomes of experiential education include increased knowledge, skills development, and value

clarification (AEE, n.d.). According to experiential learning theory, knowledge is constructed as opposed to transmitted (Kolb, 2005). Accordingly, knowledge resides in communities of practice as opposed to the individual's head. "Learning is thus a process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation (e.g., apprenticeship)" (Kolb, 2005, p. 200).

Knowles (1974) described diagnosing the need for learning through the more specific lens of human resource development. According to andragogy, the discrepancy between where the learner is now and where they want to be is the key element in the diagnostic phase. This discrepancy is determined through self-assessment. As such, adult education theorists believe that, "the individual learner's own perception of what he wants to become, what he wants to be able to achieve, at what level he wants to perform, are the starting point in building a model of competencies" (Knowles, 1974, p. 120).

When asked about her decision to participate in an internship, Melanie stated:

I thought it would help me a lot. You know, just figuring out more about the business world, and if this really was for me. So, I interned at Bank of America, and I was just learning about policies there. You know, all about retail banking. It was really nice to have the manager of the bank kind of help me understand the business world of banking. I got to do a lot of shadowing with the bankers, the tellers. And I also got to see some of the marketers.

In a related question, Melanie was asked how, if at all, she had hoped her internship might fit in with her career goals. She replied in hindsight, indicating that it did not, due to the fact that she ultimately wanted her career to be in nursing. When asked if she would participate in another internship experience, she stated that she would if it were

related to nursing; her reason being that it would be useful to gain experience with different patient scenarios.

Emma explained that an internship was required for her degree, but despite many initial attempts, she was unable to secure one, so she took a class that would waive the internship requirement. However, she persisted in finding an internship opportunity.

Once I completed all the (required) courses, I still try my last chance for where I fit internships. Then I got lucky. I've been invited to . . . mayor's office of workforce development. I was curious to try myself in this role. I needed this internship to have some experience as the only experience I had to that time was retail sales representative. The internship was for me to have work experience and explore other careers, other job positions.

As demonstrated below, Steven's decision to participate in an internship stemmed from a desire to learn something new but was also influenced by the emphasis on education and career that he grew up with.

So, growing up, even prior to attending college, I would hear the words like co-op and internship. Kind of, like, interning, getting a job while working on getting your degree. That relates to your major. Those types of things, those types of words I grew up around. And when I got into college . . . I was expecting like, okay, towards my junior or senior year of college I would need to look for an internship. So, the first few years of college, it was in the back of my mind.

At the . . . office I was working at, it was nice, I enjoyed it, however there were days that it was very tough on me. It started becoming routine, so I wanted a fresh like . . . not a fresh start but like a change. So, hearing that (NECC) provides

internships, and I received emails about providing internships, I took it on. I wanted to do an internship that relates sort of to my major, so I could kind of see . . . what, like, the workforce will be and kind of dip my feet. And what's going to be expected in my career in the future.

Allen's decision to participate in an internship resulted in career exposure as with the other participants, however, he arrived at the internship quite differently.

I was on unemployment from being out of work. I was looking just to pick up some work somehow, but . . . I'm like a semester and a half in by now. I was like . . . I really didn't want to have to just drop out, so I was looking for something that would work with my school schedule. So, I reached out to someone at NECC . . . let her know my situation. You know, what was going on, what I was trying to do. And she told me, well, we have this paid internship program. I met face to face with the internship coordinator, and she goes, I actually have this opportunity that you might like. He was the drummer for the Blue Man Group and, immediately, I was, like, "this sounds really cool." He was starting a program and was looking for an intern . . . and I was already, like, "yep, I'm interested."

A major tenant of experiential learning theory is that learning is constructed and understood from the perspective of what previous experience has led us to already know and believe (Kolb, 2005). Adult learning theory emphasizes that adult learners have a problem-centered orientation to learning. They also desire immediacy in the application of their newly acquired knowledge (Knowles, 1972, 1978). As such, the relevancy of the knowledge gained to their current role, that is, employee, is a significant consideration. This was observed in Emma's responses:

In the beginning of my internship, I was doing a lot of miscellaneous stuff that was not interesting for me. For example, photocopying and scanning a lot of documents. Like, a lot. Like spend like 4 hours doing that and that gets me a little bit less motivated. When I arrived there, you only sit in the meeting, sometime take notes. I understand that, now, but at the time I thought, like, “I will do much more.”

Steven shared a similar experience:

There was days where I didn't have work to do, which is fine. However, I was expecting more of a bigger project, I would say. I was just expecting a little bit more challenging work, because I was just working on creating and formatting, designing spreadsheets. Whereas, I thought I was gonna be more involved and do bigger and better things.

When asked how, if at all, did the internship met his expectations, Allen replied:

So, I'd never done an internship program. I didn't really know exactly what to expect. I did have some maybe preconceived notions about internships. On one hand, maybe you think that you, you might get something out of it. Or, you're just going to be given, like, a lot of like menial tasks, or, like, they won't take you seriously. I would say it, like, [it] really allowed me to gain a lot of insights. Not only about things that I've never done before, but insights, like, about myself and the way that I learn, and the way that I communicate with other people, all improved just from doing this.

Across all the participants, the value of their internship experience, or lack thereof, was ultimately demonstrated. Emma and Steven were both disappointed with the

menial tasks they were assigned. However, Emma addressed this by proactively asking questions and engaging with staff from other departments, which added value to her experience. Allen wondered if he might be assigned menial tasks but shared that he gained valuable skills and insights throughout his internship participation. As previously noted, Melanie gained valuable career-related experience for the career she was interested in at the time of her internship participation. In addition, she did state the desire to complete an additional internship if there were any in a healthcare setting.

Subordinate Theme: Key Internship Benefits. All four participants tied the benefits of internship participation to career readiness and attainment, as discussed above. Each participant was also noted on many occasions to describe the experience they gained through internship participation in the more general terms of “something to put on my resume” or similarly, “it looks good on a resume.” This study’s interview questions were designed so that several questions, asked in different ways and at different times, would elicit data pertinent to a single line of inquiry. In order to learn what participants perceived as benefits or drawbacks to internship participation, one such question asked the participants what they would tell other students considering internship participation. Steven responded:

To definitely take advantage of this . . . you know, if this school provides it, take advantage of that. You know, you’ll probably gain something from it. I would say it doesn’t hurt to try. If you did enjoy it, great, you learn something from it. These kids, they probably want to participate in another one. But for those who don’t like it, they could really learn about themselves. Like, why didn’t you like it? You

know, it's just something to take advantage of. You're getting paid to do it and if you're earning credit, why not?

When Steven was asked if he would like the opportunity to complete additional internships and, if so, why, a corresponding question also seeking data related to benefits and drawbacks, he replied in part:

I definitely would, and even if it's not for credits or degree requirements. Only because, it's a good learning experience. You're getting to meet new people; you're getting to know more about yourself.

When asked what she would tell students considering internship participation, Melanie responded:

I would tell them that it's definitely worth it. Just being able to work in such a well-known company, because they have so many good companies that they're contracted with to do the internship. I think the experience is really good for someone who's in community college and, you know, just trying to build up their resume before they . . . graduate and get their career going. Even if you don't get paid for it, I feel like it's very important to have.

Regarding the same question, Emma answered:

I will tell them to use it to push up. Because organizations like the office of workforce development don't hire young people without experience. But thanks to the internship, they can stay in the organization and gain that experience. I will motivate them to take the internship . . . even if it's not required, just because of that connection, the partnership that NECC has with the employer. Use that bridge.

Allen, responding to what he would tell other students considering internship participation, replied:

I would say . . . to keep an open mind. There is a lesson to be learned in everything that you're doing. I would say to do it. I would say, if you're nervous to do it, then you should do it. Then, that's more reason you should do it. I'm just thankful for it, because I feel like it's hard, especially in this, like, market . . . where jobs and careers, where they are limited. It's hard for really anyone to make it . . . to make a change. It's easy to get stuck doing something. I think the internship is a great way for people to experience something that they want to do, like on every level, outside of the bubble of college.

Although reference to career benefits were observable in each participant's response, other noteworthy intimations were also observed. Both Steven and Allen placed importance on knowledge gained from the perspective of self-awareness or self-improvement. This was also noted in Allen's earlier response, when he referred to insights he gained regarding the ways in which he learned and communicated with people. Both Melanie and Emma placed importance on the opportunity to work with notable organizations that they would otherwise not have access to. This may be an interesting finding relating to gender. However, it may also be influenced by ethnicity, as Steven and Allen are both of Asian descent.

Another insight of note came in examining what the participants prioritized, or, more specifically, did not prioritize in their paid internship experience. Allen made no specific mention to the monetary compensation associated with the internship. Steven and Melanie made reference to payment, however, in both cases, this was perceived by the

researcher/interviewer as an aside in their concluding sentence to what they would tell other students. In a separate response, Steven noted that he would participate in additional internships, even if not for credit. There was monetary value to those credits he would otherwise have to pay for. Emma stated that internship participation is “not about the money, it’s about the knowledge.” Similarly, Melanie said she would recommend internship participation to students, even if it were unpaid. This finding is of significant interest, given the financial need demonstrated by each participant. Each participant was working, looking for work, and/or living independently while enrolled. In addition, three of the four participants identified themselves on their demographic form as either a Pell grant recipient or Pell grant eligible. Pell grants are usually awarded to students who demonstrate significant financial need.

In all cases, the internship was not ultimately required for completion of any of the participants’ academic program. With the exception of Allen, the participants directly sought out an internship and utilized internship participation as elective credit. All four participants believed that their internship experience would be viewed favorably on a resume. Likewise, all the participants believed that their internship participation would likely have a positive impact on their postgraduation employment.

Research Question 2

How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?

Category: Interrole Conflict. Interrole conflict emerged as another consistent and overarching concept across the data sets in terms of what nontraditional students need to balance their multiple roles. Kasworm (2018), whose scholarship stems from her

research on adult undergraduate learners, stated that, “adult higher education has always served individuals who required specialized access and flexibility, who had specialized needs and life demands, and now who require learning access for a lifetime” (p. 85). Such specialized needs and life demands can often result in interrole conflict, defined in Chapter 1 as discord between the expectations associated with differing roles (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2015). Multiple interview questions utilized for this study were formulated to elicit data that would reveal: (a) what, if any, interrole conflicts were experienced by the study participants, and (b) how, if at all, interrole conflicts impacted their internship participation. Financial need, a situational factor, revealed itself as a principal element upon which the conflicting demands experienced by the participants centered.

As previously shared, Allen pursued the welding trade to be able to provide for his family, but it was not his long-term career goal. Finding himself unemployed due to COVID-19, financial need continued to heavily influence his decision-making process with respect to his next steps. An effort to marry financial stability with his musical pursuits was detected during this process.

Even still, I was hearing that voice, like . . . if you’re going to do something else, like, make sure it’s . . . like something stable or something you . . . can fall back on. If you’re gonna pivot, just still make it something like the most secure path you could do. So, initially, before I went to NECC, I tried like a medical technology program. The reason for choosing a medical technology program actually was . . . if I was to obtain that career . . . the specific tech job I was looking at was only a couple of days a week. And I would have all this time off

afterwards, and I was, like, oh that's fine, I could make music and do the music thing. And it just wasn't a fit and it was like . . . it only like further made me discover . . . all right . . . you should just do it if you're going to try and do it. You should just go for it. I was looking around at schools and NECC seemed to like offer a flexible program. Honestly . . . NECC was an affordable option.

A clear struggle between Allen's familial responsibility as a husband and parent, his financial need, and what would personally be his ideal career choice is demonstrated above in his response to why he decided to attend college. The struggle between financial need and his preferred career in music is further demonstrated in his response to how, if at all, nontraditional student characteristics impacted his educational pursuits.

I was sort of discouraged from a young age to do . . . to pursue that path (music). It was the typical, I guess, what anyone that wants to go to an art path would hear. You know, you sure you really want to do that? You'll never make it, or it's just too competitive. I'd sort of like, had been living with the regret of like, not at least trying. Music is always . . . was something super important to me. No matter what, I don't have any regrets that I didn't try now. You know, for better or for worse.

Mention was made in the data that addressed Research Question 1, that Allen came upon the internship program through the course of looking for employment. He was searching for a way to make supplemental income without impacting school.

I'm looking for a job, something that will just help me work around my school schedule. And I don't want to have to just, like, dip right out and have to go back to the trades. And then maybe get sucked in and then taken away from my

education. Because I really want to give this a solid go. I'll clean your offices at 20 hours a week, if you'll just work around my schedule . . . just something that supports school.

Emma initially worked part-time while attending school full-time. Evidence of financial circumstances creating a struggle between her work, school, and home life was witnessed in her response:

I worked part-time. It was hard for me to keep up with work, school, homework. I was lucky to marry a wonderful man who supported me on my education. He helped me financially to pay for my tuition. Sometimes, he even cooked for me, so I can spend time on homework. He was understandable that I had to spend the weekends in the library. Financially it was hard. But thanks to receiving scholarships, FAFSA, I got to finish NECC successfully.

Melanie's response to the same question—how, if at all, nontraditional student characteristics impacted her educational pursuits—addressed the issue of conflicting roles as a problem to be solved.

I wish there was a solution for it all but, you know, it's . . . I feel like it's life. You have to kind of pay bills and, you know, be there for your kids, and it's been like that for me. I've had to go to school part time so that I can get the education that I need and continue on and get my career going.

In a follow-up question, Melanie was asked to expand on her response, in an effort to better understand what she believed the problem and/or solution to be. She stated:

I just wish there was, maybe, like, more government assistance for students. You know that way, maybe if I would have gotten more help by the government, I

wouldn't have to work full-time and have to do so much hours. Maybe then I could have been more focused in school and done more credits or more classes in school. If there was just more financial assistance. That way, I could have just been more focused, and I wouldn't have to spend so much time being at work.

Superordinate Theme: Scheduling and Time Management. Numerous topics associated with how the nontraditional student participants accessed their internship participation were noted across the data. These topics were overarchingly related to scheduling and time management. Online completion of the internship hours was noted by two participants. Flexibility in scheduling of hours was noted by three participants. This was demonstrated specifically with the internship site hours. It was also noted in the volume of internship opportunities offered through the program, which allowed the participants to identify one that would meet their many needs. As a related topic, transportation also played a role in how the participants experienced situational factors throughout their internship participation.

With respect to online opportunities, Allen and Steven both demonstrated how the ability to complete their internship hours online alleviated school/family interrole conflict. Allen described the online opportunity as follows:

I was blessed with COVID making it all online, so I didn't have to do much commuting, or any commuting. Everything was online. But, yeah, definitely, uh, managing my time with my classes around my daughter and family responsibilities certainly presented its challenges.

The data presented thus far revealed Allen's perseverance to complete a degree in music as well as his excitement at securing a music-focused internship under the mentorship of

a former Blue Man Group drummer. In a follow-up question, Allen was asked if the internship had not been offered online, would the challenges be significant enough to impede his participation. He responded to the question:

If it (internship) wasn't online, then there's a good chance my daughter would be in regular school . . . and I don't know how I would navigate childcare. The scheduling would be a huge challenge. That goes into, like, everything we do now.

This ease of online access was also observed to be important to Allen with respect to his classes overall.

This will be my first semester commuting in September. Up until now, everything has been remote. I am not convinced that I would have made as much progress as I have to this point without the ability to do so much online. Normally, a no-traffic commute is about 30 minutes. But with traffic in the city it could easily be 1 to 1.5 hours during rush hour. I'm . . . hoping to take classes during non-rush hour times for the days I need to commute.

Steven described the benefit of his internship being online in this way:

With this internship, I was working remotely, so I was able to work in the comfort of my own home. With my previous jobs, I would have to actually drive out to the job, so it took some time out of my day. At home, there was something going on medically with one of our family members, so being able to work remotely, I was not only able to . . . work, but I was able to, like, look after that family member. Just in case something were to occur.

Addressing the topic of how, if at all, nontraditional student characteristics impacted his educational pursuits, Steven spoke in terms of what he gained from the experience of having to work full-time while attending school full-time. His response to this question represents a different aspect of time management:

I'd say it would impact to me greatly, only because it taught me skills that either I didn't have or . . . I already had within myself but it developed even more. Such as being able to multitask, being able to prioritize certain things that have . . . certain tasks and things that have to do with life, such as prioritizing and balancing my schoolwork and my regular work. I would say it was tough, but it helped me grow thicker skin, and as well, grow a stronger mindset.

When asked what, if any, situational obstacles impacted her internship participation, Emma replied that she did not experience any difficulties. Her broader response revealed that flexibility, in the forms of an accommodating scheduling and evening classes, was the key to achieving balance and the ultimate absence of barriers.

At the same time I was doing this internship, I volunteer for Jump Start as a teacher's aide in kindergarten. I was using (public transportation). I was teaching kids, reading to them, teaching them how to read. After that, I went to the office.

They were very flexible with my schedule. I have to say that I put my schedule myself . . . this is going to be the hours I'm going to work, and they accept that.

After that, after 5 pm, I run to the school to take my Excel classes, which ended at 8:20. So, everything was well balanced, and I didn't experience any difficulties.

Likewise, Melanie expressed that flexibility in her internship site had a positive impact on her experience.

Luckily, my internship schedule at the bank was very manageable. They were just very flexible with my hours. The only thing that was kind of hard for me to complete the internship was transportation was not reliable at times. But, luckily, my manager was very understanding and flexible with me. Especially because she knew I was a student. She even let me take time off if needed for studying or catching up with homework.

In Allen and Steven's cases, the elimination of time spent commuting allowed them to be home when needed, thereby alleviating scheduling conflicts or conflicting responsibilities. In Emma and Melanie's cases, flexible schedules served to mitigate conflicting schedules, affecting their ability to serve in multiple desired roles.

Subordinate Theme: Personal Support. Personal support, in the form of motivation, understanding, and assistance at home, was also found to alleviate the pressures of interrole conflict for the study participants. Childcare was a particular concern for those participants who were parent students. Melanie described her childcare needs:

I had to put my son in the voucher program . . . and I never got a call back from the government . . . to have him in a set daycare and one that's closest to home. They would always find one, but far away and it just wouldn't work out with school and work. So, it would have been convenient to have a daycare for him. That way, whenever my mom couldn't take care of him there wouldn't be a problem. He would go to daycare or my mom could just help out whenever daycare couldn't help out. That also would have been a big help while I'm in school.

Regarding her internship participation, specifically, Melanie stated that her mother and sisters babysitting her son while she was at the internship site definitely helped her. In fact, she believed it would have likely been impossible to participate in the internship without their support. As a parent, Allen described the importance of personal support as well. This expressed itself in both childcare and moral support.

My wife was very supportive of me doing this . . . making this journey, and definitely helped with that, as I was trying to complete the internship work.

Maybe take, you know, occupy my daughter. She's a lot of energy.

As a result of COVID-19, Allen and his daughter were both home throughout the school year. Were his daughter in school, childcare support would have likewise been critical. Allen stated. "She's not at the age where she can get herself on and off the bus. So, yeah, scheduling would be a huge challenge. It goes into everything we do now."

The data presented in response to Research Question 2 indicate that financial circumstances created interrole conflicts for three of the four study participants. As nontraditional students, each participant was filling the multiple roles of student, family member or parent, and employee or volunteer. While all the participants were managing multiple life responsibilities at the time of their internship, each responded that they had not experienced any personal barriers or obstacles to their internship participation. Flexibility in terms of physical access to their internship and their internship hours overall, as well as personal supports, revealed themselves as key factors in the mitigation of situational barriers.

Research Question 3

How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?

Category: Institutional Engagement. Institutional engagement emerged as the third overarching category across all participants. Numerous examples of student–faculty/staff interactions were observed throughout the participant interviews. In two cases, student–internship mentor interactions were observed to be meaningful encounters. Institutional agents include faculty, staff, and administrators. Student services personnel, in particular, are well positioned to advance student engagement. They can promote students’ sense of belonging, a key factor in student motivation (Tinto, 2017). In addition, Astin (1984) suggested that student services personnel playing a more prominent role in institutional operations is one element in maximizing student involvement.

Melanie demonstrated engagement with both the internship coordinator as well as with her peers via events coordinated by the department:

The woman who handles the whole internship program there, she’s doing a wonderful job just keeping everything organized. And sending out emails to those who previously did internships, to see if they ever wanted to come back and do it again. Or to attend events, like for the anniversary of the internship program. I did attend one of those and that was nice to hear everybody else’s experience with their internship and the other corporate companies that they were interning in.

During Emma's interview, she referred to the internship staff being very supportive. Following up on that statement, Emma was asked to describe her communication with the internship department. She explained:

First, I communicated with them via email. Then I made an appointment to come and speak with them. Then I remember we communicated via phone, which was very convenient for me. I would say, we got in touch with the internship department five times in total.

Allen described the support that he received:

The internship coordinator was really awesome. She was just, kind of wanted to just be a support if you needed anything. Like, if any of the students needed anything, help with their internships or really anything at all. She was, like, left the door open for us. And she, like, checked in throughout the semester a couple of times, with maybe like a questionnaire or just to see how things are going. She was very helpful.

Allen also referenced interaction with the music department head in his responses. He was not made aware of the internship program by the department head, but he discussed how the internship course could be utilized for elective credit with him. Allen referred to the department head on different occasions as caring, motivating, and supportive. Allen noted the support of his internship supervisor, as did Emma, when asked about personal supports that positively impacted their internship experience. Both experienced their supervisors in a mentorship capacity. While not institutional agents, per se, the internship supervisors work in partnership with institutional agents and could therefore be viewed as extensions of such. Likewise, the students engaged with the internship supervisors

through the institution's internship program. Emma stated, "My supervisor was like my mentor. She was very understanding, very patient. So patient with us. She pushed me through it, and also, I pushed myself." Allen described the relationship:

So my boss, the owner of the company where I did the internship, he was like really supportive of me. And almost, like, mentored me along the way. You know, if I needed anything, or just wanted to like get up on the Zoom and chat about things. He was, like, wanted to like get to know me better, and that definitely helped me.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Astin (1984, 1999), Pascarella and Terenzini (2009), and Tinto (1997, 2017) are the seminal researchers in the field of postsecondary student engagement. Some key postulates found in their scholarship were observed in each participant's responses. According to Astin (1984), student learning in any educational program is directly proportional to both the quantity and quality of student engagement. Pascarella and Terenzini (2009) stated that the frequency and quality of student engagement outside of the classroom is equally important. Relatedly, one of the key dimensions of student motivation, as noted by Tinto (2017), is the extent to which institutional structures facilitate student's academic and social engagement.

Superordinate Theme: Internship Programming. This research was interested in learning about nontraditional students' perceptions of their internship experience from their time of contemplation to completion. The interview question prompts were designed to elicit data regarding their experiences leading up to the first hour at their internship site. How did they hear about internship opportunities? What did they hear about internship opportunities? What was it like securing and registering for an internship?

Separate interview questions were designed to elicit data that would potentially illuminate strengths and weaknesses of the internship program.

The extracts provided below describe the participants' experiences leading up to their internship participation. Evidence of student engagement, as well as program strengths and weaknesses, is also observable in these descriptions. Allen communicated the process leading up to his internship:

So, I learned about the internship program, checked out the website, and then I met face-to-face with the internship coordinator. On the website, there was like a list of companies that were looking for interns, and like related qualifications. Almost like you were searching for a job. But it was like its own thing geared for looking for students with, like, the experience they were hoping for. Some of it may have had, like, a little bit about the salary, or may not have. The internship coordinator helped me fix my resume and apply to the position. Getting accepted for the internship was sort of like interviewing for a job.

Melanie described her experience:

There was an automated email that went to all the students at NECC at that time. And it was for anyone that was interested in doing an internship. I did reach back out to the woman that was in charge of the internships and it was very easy. She just signed me up for an information session. I learned a little bit more of how this is all going to work.

Emma was observed to be more proactive in her portrayal:

In the [student services center], they help me with it all. They explain about the portal. [The internship coordinator] was very helpful, understanding. And she

answering my emails, explain to me how everything works. That was motivating because I had that support, and I wasn't ignored. I was visible to them. They were available to me. Everything was there, I just had to come and take it. I think everybody should . . . use all their resources they offer. There is no excuse saying, "oh I didn't hear that, I didn't know that." You just have to ask. And even if you don't ask, just be in that environment . . . don't come only for classes.

Steven portrayed how he received information regarding the internship program:

Prior to getting an internship with them [internship department], they reached out to students, making them aware that the school has internships. And, we [internship department] found some that relate to what you're majoring in, so here are some to take a look at and apply for them. I emailed them when I was first made aware of the internship opportunity and I applied. There were, you know, just normal like interactions, email conversations by telling them, "hey thank you for letting me know about this" . . . and "hey, I applied to this." Just updating them really, and they would tell me, "thank you for updating me." So, the beginning portion was very frequent communication, however, once I told them I got accepted they let me know . . . I need to enroll in the class. Once I registered . . . communication from there, it kind of died down.

In addition to sharing his perceptions of communication he received leading up to his internship enrollment, Steven shared his perspective regarding communication coming from the internship department in general.

Yes, they did reach out to me personally and emailed me about the internship opportunities, however, I don't know if it's the same across the board for other

students. I feel like it's something that the school could emphasize really on. Have professors at school, let them know like, hey, the school has internship opportunities, take advantage of it. Or even with like new incoming students, like orientations about it. I don't know if, like, during orientation they do bring it up. But if they did bring it up, and I can't remember, then it kind of says a lot about it was not being emphasized or overlooked.

The extracts above highlight not only frequency of engagement but differing modes of engagement (email, information session, campus departments, orientation). All of the participants also mentioned a required course that accompanied the internship itself. Their experiences with the course differed, however. Allen only mentioned the course in the context of being pleased to ultimately learn it could count as elective credit. Melanie felt the course was very useful. She stated:

I was going to have to take another class, along with the internship, just to learn a little bit more about resumes and, you know, professionalism at these locations. And I think it was all very useful and helpful because some people need to know about these things before going into these big corporations. That helps a lot.

Melanie later described additional benefits of her course participation:

The internship department and staff were very supportive because we would meet once or twice a week at the required course while you take the internship, and we would discuss goals, things that were going well during the internship, and we discussed anything that was going wrong. I felt that was necessary to keep learning and growing throughout the whole internship experience. We also had to

do a final PowerPoint presentation at the end of everything we learned during the internship.

Steven and Emma did not exhibit perceived value in the associated course.

Steven's discussion of the class was limited to his frustration with the lack of communication about the course itself:

I didn't know when my class would start. I knew prior to applying that when I do take the internship, I do need to . . . register for the class. However, . . . the person that did help me register for the class . . . didn't let me know when I would start or how it would work. I didn't know that it was like a mini-session at NECC. I didn't know it was a Saturday class.

Emma demonstrated mixed feelings about the course content:

I had to pay for the internship class in order to take an internship. I didn't like that, because the only thing we did in that class is to report to the professor how is our week, what we learn, etc. The only good thing about the course was that I could read the reflections of other students' internships. That was interesting.

Melanie was the only participant to describe her experience with the internship course in any detail. She described useful soft-skills building and interactions that led to personal growth throughout the course. Emma was not pleased with the course, overall, but she did mention the benefit of interacting with and learning from her peers. Allen and Steven shared no experiences within the course, suggesting that it was not a meaningful part of their internship participation.

Subordinate Theme: Career Exploration. Elements of career exploration were observed in all four participant interviews. Allen noted the volume of opportunities available through the internship department in different fields, and added:

Up until this point, I'd never done anything outside of . . . really outside of like washing dishes, and then, after high school was all just trade work. So, nothing outside of a restaurant or like working under a car or working in, you know, a welding shop or fabrication shop.

Emma's interest in participating in additional internship opportunities was grounded in exploration:

The reason why I say "yes," is because I want to try myself in a different environment with a different team. With a different culture, if possible, with different responsibilities. This is the golden time of my years, when I'm very curious and thirsting for knowledge, experience. And I want to use this thirst with different organizations.

As previously mentioned, Melanie's internship served in a career exploration capacity, ultimately showing her that she did not want to pursue a career in business any longer. She stated: "I guess it was a little helpful to, you know, get the experience in the business of banking. Because, that also kind of helped me to see that I'm just not passionate in business."

Career exploration, in general, is not only for the purpose of identifying which major or career field one desires. Steven relayed an element of career exploration within his chosen field:

I'm going to major and complete my . . . bachelor's degree in business. However, I really don't know what I'm going to do . . . because business is very broad. You really could work anywhere. You could work in the medical field, pharmacy, finance. You could end up anywhere. It [internship] would help me, like, dig deeper and figure out, like, the nuts and grits of what I want.

Overall, all of the study participants appeared to have positive perceptions of their internship experiences. This was, perhaps, as with Research Question 2, most evident in their responses to two key questions. When asked what institutional barriers they experienced with their internship participation, and what might have improved their internship experience, all participants stated that there were no barriers or improvements that they could think of. After a brief pause, however, Steven again referenced the communication barrier he perceived.

With respect to the internship process, two programmatic factors were mentioned by all of the study participants. They all equated the process of searching, applying, and interviewing for the internship to that of doing so for real-world job opportunities. Likewise, all participants noted the volume of internship opportunities that were available to NECC students, which positively impacted their selection process. Further, each participant described the overall process as "easy." In addition, the participants stated that they would engage in another internship, even if unpaid or for elective credit. This suggests a positive experience. They did, however, express one restriction. Three of the participants stated that another internship would have to fit into their schedule, reinforcing the need to mitigate situational barriers. The fourth participant was interested

if it was specific to their career choice, for which the volume of internship opportunities allowed.

Summary of Results

Four nontraditional community college students were interviewed to explore their lived experiences and how the phenomenon of internship participation affected their lives and educational pursuits. This chapter presented the findings and data analysis, with reference to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Results of the data analysis yielded three superordinate themes and three subordinate themes. The superordinate themes were (a) value of experience, (b) scheduling and time management, and (c) internship programming. The subordinate themes were (a) key internship benefits, (b) personal support, and (c) career exploration.

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to examine nontraditional student learners' perceptions of their internship participation while enrolled in community college, how situational and institutional barriers impacted their internship completion, and what strategies or programmatic features mitigated such barriers. Regarding their internship participation overall, the participants' perceptions were predominantly positive. This is supported, in part, by their interest in future internship engagement. However, the participants intimated that future engagement could be impeded by access and scheduling challenges. The desire of the students to participate in internship engagement, and their increased satisfaction in doing so, was noted in studies presented by Hora et al. (2020a), Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017), and Routon and Walker (2019).

Situational barriers leading to interrole conflict were found to present challenges to internship participation for this study's participants. Flexibility in scheduling; online access; and personal supports, particularly in the form of childcare; mitigated conflicting demands for the participants. Markle (2015), Peterson (2016), and Troester-Trate (2020) all noted accessible and affordable childcare as either supporting students in educational persistence, or as student recommendations for stress reduction. The use of online platforms was recommended by Osam et al. (2017), Remenick (2019), and Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017). While Wilke et al. (2016) found that students attained the same skill attainment in online clinical training, they did not assess their student participants' perceptions of the online modality.

Two unexpected findings emerged relating to an observed lack of awareness among the study participants. First, in spite of their demonstrated financial need, the participants did not articulate any impact that financial compensation and available stipends had on their personal internship experience. Likewise, they did not articulate an understanding of how personal circumstances impacted their internship participation. Lack of awareness of career services, advising, and internships was noted to present a challenge to adult learners (Dikhtyar et al., 2020). However, none of the research presented in this study broached the students' lack of self-awareness in relation to the unexpected findings specifically. Markle (2015), Peterson (2016), and Reminick (2019) all recommended that student services personnel be knowledgeable in the unique needs of nontraditional students and the accommodations needed to meet those needs. Such personnel could be useful in addressing this subject.

Chapter 5 summarizes the study and reiterates the significance of addressing situational and institutional barriers to nontraditional student internship participation. The limitations and delimitations of this study are also presented. The implications of the study findings to community college administrators are also discussed in Chapter 5. Also included are recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As previously noted, ample research exists regarding nontraditional students and student perceptions of internship engagement as discrete topics. Further, research regarding postsecondary student internship engagement in the 2-year sector is limited (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). As such, a gap exists in the literature regarding nontraditional student experiences with internship engagement while enrolled in community college. This research problem has several implications. It is estimated that nontraditional students make up approximately two-thirds of community college enrollments, and their unique needs lead to higher attrition rates (Bergman et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019). Not surprisingly, data suggests that nontraditional students are contributing to the completion problem noted at community colleges (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Conversely, nontraditional students could contribute to increased degree completions if the situational and institutional barriers they face were mitigated through institutional programming and services.

This study examined how situational and institutional factors impacted internship engagement by nontraditional students enrolled in a community college located in the northeastern United States. Situational factors stem from nontraditional students' familial, residential, and financial circumstances. Institutional factors stem from institutional policies and practices, curriculum planning, and student services. Nontraditional students' perceptions of their experiences with experiential learning have

received little inquiry; therefore, it is unknown how nontraditional students experience participation in internships. Although experiential learning aligns with the motivation and learning preferences of adult learners, it is not known whether those characteristics that identify them as nontraditional lead to interrole conflict, defined as conflicting demands associated with multiple responsibilities, or if such conflict creates barriers to their participation in this important mode of learning. The goal of this study was to contribute to the literature surrounding internship participation by nontraditional students and to assist community college administrators, faculty, and staff in implementing experiential learning pedagogies that will improve student engagement and therefore persistence of nontraditional students.

Implications of Findings

Implications for Postsecondary Leaders

As noted in the literature, nontraditional students make up the majority of postsecondary enrollments. This study's findings reinforce the assertion in related literature that nontraditional students have unique needs in light of their financial independence and multiple life roles. The high attrition rate among this student population suggests that postsecondary institutions have yet to adequately address these needs. This should be of significant concern to postsecondary leaders, particularly in the 2-year sector, for numerous reasons. Such leaders have a fiduciary and ethical responsibility to their students, funders, and policy makers.

Fiduciary Responsibility. Higher education has been under increasing pressure to improve student outcomes and postgraduation employment (Gault et al., 2018; Guarise & Kostenblatt, 2018; Sauder et al., 2019). Community colleges, in particular, exhibit low

completion rates (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Low completion rates negatively impact millions of employers who are dependent upon an educated and skilled labor pool (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2020). Community colleges are predominantly relied upon for their contribution to workforce development. A key reason that nontraditional students enroll in community colleges is to secure financial and career advancement within 2 years (Ishitani & Kamer 2020). It is, therefore, incumbent upon community college leaders to identify institutional conditions that affect student success. Conditions that positively influence student success should be assessed for replication across academic programs and campus services. Conditions that negatively influence student success should be examined to identify potential solutions.

Ethical Responsibility. Increasing nontraditional student persistence, thereby potentially increasing degree completions, does not only foster financial stability for this student population. It also has societal benefits such as reduced unemployment and incarceration rates. Viewing the acquisition of skills and training through a human capital framework, Dikhtyar et al. (2020) noted that the lack of such skills attainment results in social inequality. In no way diminishing the significance of this implication, the overarching ethical implication is simpler. Ignoring the needs of nontraditional students marginalizes this student population. Such marginalization can impede their sense of belonging and motivation to persist in their educational pursuits. Insights into how to correct this problem can be drawn from this study's literature review. Multiple studies regarding nontraditional student barriers, and the personal and institutional behaviors that helped students overcome those barriers, were presented in Chapter 2. An analysis and

synthesis of their findings can guide postsecondary practitioners in their efforts to improve access and student satisfaction for nontraditional student learners.

Implications for Postsecondary Practitioners

Three key impressions emerged from the Chapter 2 literature review. First, curricular programming and campus facilities should be designed to promote student engagement with peers as well as institutional agents. Second, financial assistance has been shown to improve student persistence. Lastly, the benefit of engaging students via online platforms was observed. The implications of each are examined below.

Student Engagement. Examples of efforts that improve student interaction include specialized programs; improved access to courses, faculty, and student support services; and active learning. Such efforts have been positively linked with both student development and persistence (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2009; Tinto, 2017). One of the goals of this study was to assist faculty and administrators in developing innovative experiential learning pedagogies that will improve student engagement and therefore persistence for nontraditional students, through increased understanding of how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges experience the phenomenon of internship participation. Sisselman-Borgia and Torino's (2017) study exemplifies a specialized experiential learning program developed with an innovative design.

These researchers performed a case study of a pilot program in New York State that was designed specifically to provide adult learners with experiential learning opportunities. The program study was undertaken as a quality improvement measure, and it was ultimately modified based upon student feedback. The experiential learning program was modified, resulting in increased enrollment. The Sisselman-Borgia and

Torino (2017) study findings and recommendations have direct implications for access and active learning. Students felt that individual time spent with instructors was more helpful than the required group meetings because they were more easily scheduled. Based upon this, the group meetings were replaced with an independent study. However, peer-to-peer interaction was still achieved through online engagement. In addition, students desired more time within the organization site, as they valued the experience gained over classroom learning. Accordingly, an additional experiential learning opportunity was added. Lastly, community-based organizations were often found to improve student access, given their adaptable hours and flexible projects (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017).

Edenfield and McBrayer (2020) urged institutional leaders to keep students' experiences and perceptions at the center of planning when considering institutional changes to improve student outcomes. Indeed, the power of IPA lies in giving voice to participants as they express and make meaning of their experiences with the phenomenon being studied. The desire for internship participation was expressed by all of the study participants in multiple ways. Three of the four participants in this study actively sought out internship engagement, despite it not being required for their degree. All four participants would recommend internship participation to other students who were considering such. In addition, all four participants expressed interest in completing an additional internship; however, flexible scheduling and relevancy were relayed as necessary to do so. A program designed specifically for nontraditional students, as the one explored in Sisselman-Borgia and Torino's (2017) study, could increase their access to this mode of learning.

Financial Assistance. Given that Hora et al. (2020b) showed that financial hardship impeded internship participation, postsecondary administrators may wish to consider offering financial assistance for this important learning activity. Several studies from the literature review are offered as exemplars. Levin and Garcia (2018) and Scrivener et al. (2015) examined the impact of a program launched by CUNY, which was designed to increase degree completions as well as the speed to degree completion for participating students. While the program of study was not an internship program or designed specifically for nontraditional students, it still yields valuable insight for internship program design. Program features included specialized advising as well as enhanced career and tutoring services. These services have a financial implication but should also be examined when considering student engagement implications, as discussed above. Regarding further financial implications, the program also featured use of free textbooks as well as financial assistance for tuition and transportation.

Program participants were found to be more likely to enroll full time, complete developmental courses, and persist to degree completion (Scrivener et al., 2015). In fact, degree completions for participants were nearly twice that of the control group students. Additional costs to administer the program were estimated at \$16,300 per student. However, the cost per graduate decreased significantly given the substantial increase in degree completions. Similarly, Ishitani and Kamer (2020) found that increases in institutional support service expenditures and proportion of full-time students were associated with increased graduation rates at High Transfer community colleges.

Troester-Trate's (2020) study also suggested the benefit of providing financial assistance to students. In light of the financial challenges that community college students

often experience, Troester-Trate examined a support program that provided a food pantry, transportation assistance, and childcare assistance. She found that students at risk of withdrawal who accessed one or more of the program services were found to persist at equal rates of students who were not deemed at risk and did not access program services. This indicates that the support program was effective in equalizing persistence, despite obstacles faced by the enrolled students. Troester-Trate (2020) and Peterson (2016) both highlighted that a significant number of nontraditional students identify as single parents, and that these students exhibit lower rates of persistence. As such, affordable and accessible childcare is of significant importance to parent students. This need may be best exemplified in Melanie's words:

I had to put my son in the voucher program. They would always find one [daycare], but far away and it just wouldn't work out with school. So, it would have been convenient to have a daycare for him. That way, whenever my mom couldn't take care of him, there wouldn't be a problem. That would have been a big help while I'm in school.

The studies presented above offered multiple services that were found to support nontraditional student success. While the value of such services was determined to offset the costs of their implementation, it is unlikely that institutions could develop and implement them all, particularly in the short term. Therefore, institutions should engage their institutional research departments, faculty, and student services personnel to determine which services could be most quickly developed and/or could impact the greatest number of students. Further, upon developing specialized programming and/or services, a cost-benefit analysis should be performed. The paid internship program at

NECC, this study's subject site, provided hourly compensation as well as a travel stipend. The impact of this financial assistance was not articulated by the study participants. A cost-benefit analysis of the program could provide useful insights.

Benefits of Online Platforms. Remenick (2019) noted that many of the barriers faced by nontraditional students stemmed from structural components of postsecondary institutions. One solution that she offered to improve student access to faculty and services was to meet students where they are, that is, in their home or workplace, via virtual live chats. Findings from Sisselman-Borgia and Torino's (2017) program study also highlighted the benefit of online platforms. They suggested that asynchronous activities allow time for student reflection, while synchronous chats allow for real-time interaction. With respect to online internship programming specifically, the findings of Wilkes et al. (2016) support the efficacy of online skills development. These researchers explored the use of online clinical training by social work educators. Although online clinical training may be questioned, given the hands-on nature of skills-based education, Wilkes et al. discovered that there were no statistically significant differences in students' clinical training scores between the face-to-face and online delivery modes.

The benefits of online engagement were also observed in the data collected from this researcher's examination of nontraditional students' experiences with internship participation. The ease of regular online interaction with internship department staff via email, and the use of the department's internship portal to search and apply for internships of interest, were frequently relayed by the study participants. The ability to complete internship hours online was also observed to mitigate interrole conflict for two of the four participants. This was displayed in one of Allen's responses:

I was blessed with COVID, making it all online, so I didn't have to do much commuting or any commuting. Everything was online. But, yeah, definitely, uh, managing my time with my classes around my daughter and family responsibilities certainly presented its challenges. If it [internship] wasn't online, then there's a good chance my daughter would be in regular school . . . and I don't know how I would navigate childcare. The scheduling would be a huge challenge. That goes into, like, everything we do now.

Allen shared that all of his courses happened to be remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He did not believe that he would have made the same progress toward degree completion without the ability to do so much online, as conflicting schedules would have interfered. His reference to COVID as a "blessing," because it made the internship entirely online, demonstrates the significance of this delivery mode to his internship participation.

Summary of Implications

Career attainment supports adult roles such as parent, spouse, and adult learner. Students, themselves, and society, as a whole, benefit from the economic growth associated with degree attainment. Higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, have a fiduciary and ethical responsibility to design and implement programs, practices, facilities, and services that promote skills attainment and degree completion. This design must consider the unique needs of nontraditional students, given that they make up approximately two-thirds of community college enrollments. An examination of research related to specialized programs designed to support nontraditional students can

inform the development of pilot programs to support nontraditional student success at their institutions.

Unexpected Finding 1

An unexpected finding emerged when examining what the participants articulated as key internship benefits. Each of the four participants engaged in a paid internship through a program that also provided travel stipends. Further, all four participants demonstrated a degree of financial need in one or more of the following ways: supporting a household (with or without dependents), having to work while enrolled in school, or identifying as a Pell grant recipient (or being Pell grant eligible). Despite this, compensation for the internship was only mentioned casually by two participants, and not in the context of their own personal internship experience. Similarly, Allen learned about the paid internship program while speaking with college staff about his need for paid employment. He was able to engage in the internship rather than paid employment for supplemental income, which implies the benefit of compensation. However, he, too, failed to mention the program's compensation when sharing about his internship experience.

Lack of compensation can deter student participation in internship opportunities (Hora et al., 2020b), particularly given costs associated with internship participation such as travel costs. Many students in their study indicated that they had simply accepted the fact that most internships were unpaid, and that they would be surprised to be able to secure a paid internship. Compensation is something they were willing to forgo to gain valuable workplace experience. Ultimately, the value of gaining workplace experience

and the perception of enhanced employability superseded other potential benefits, including compensation, for this study's participants.

Unexpected Finding 2

An additional unexpected finding emerged when examining what personal barriers or obstacles the participants experienced with their internship experiences. Given the multiple roles that the nontraditional student participants were juggling, it was anticipated that they would articulate obstacles relating to or stemming from their unique life circumstances. Indeed, many challenges were noted in the participant extracts provided in Chapter 4. These challenges were observed across an array of interview questions designed to illuminate potential situational factors experienced by the participants. Nevertheless, when the participants were asked directly to share, "what, if any, personal barriers or obstacles have you experienced with your internship experience?," they all replied that they had not experienced any barriers or obstacles. This may be due, in part, to the flexibility they were provided by online access, having accommodating schedules, and the personal support they received. However, it may also be due, in part, to nontraditional students failing to recognizing the impact of their interrole conflict.

Markle (2015), Peterson (2016), and Remenick (2019) all highlighted the importance of support services personnel being knowledgeable about the demands on nontraditional students as well as accommodations that were needed to support nontraditional students. Student services personnel are well situated to assist nontraditional students in both recognizing and mitigating these impacts. However, specialized knowledge among student services personnel, alone, is not sufficient. The

institutional environment must also allow opportunities for sufficient engagement between nontraditional student learners and institutional staff who are prepared to serve them.

Unexpected Finding 3

Although this study's focus was on situational and institutional factors relating to internship participation, elements of career exploration were also observed throughout the participant interviews. This subordinate theme expressed itself both within and outside of internship engagement. Three of the four participants made reference to the volume of internship opportunities that were available to them through NECC's program. As previously mentioned, the volume of internship opportunities improved the chance of finding one that would work around busy schedules. However, it appeared to serve another function. Allen and Emma both displayed an appreciation for the chance to explore opportunities that would expand their professional experiences.

Melanie discovered during her internship that she did not have a passion for her chosen career, and she is now pursuing a different degree program. While Steven's major remained consistent, he displayed an element of career exploration within his chosen discipline. Given the broad application of his business degree, he appreciated the opportunity to explore its application in different occupational fields. Additionally, prior to enrollment at NECC and participation in the internship program, Allen and Emma both revealed their decisions to change careers. Again, career exploration was not within the scope of this research study; however, given the prevalence of career exploration as a theme across the participants, its inclusion in the findings is warranted.

Overall, this study's findings align closely with the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. Likewise, the findings support the assertions of multiple studies presented in Chapter 2 and highlighted in Chapter 4. As such, this study reinforces what has already been learned about nontraditional students. It does contribute, however, to the limited research regarding nontraditional students' experiences with internship participation.

McCarrell and Selznick (2020) found a high correlation between items associated with active learning and community college student engagement. Edenfield and McBrayer's (2020) discussion of existing success and retention literature notes that it tends to focus on student attributes rather than on institutional qualities. Institutional qualities of the paid internship program at NECC were examined in this study. Outreach to inform students of the paid internship program and the process of finding and applying to internship opportunities were found to foster student engagement with institutional agents. The required course was not observed to foster student engagement with institutional agents. In general, opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement appeared to be lacking throughout the internship program.

Routon and Walker (2019) found that students who had engaged in an internship without a tenure gap were found to exhibit greater satisfaction with their college experience, as well as higher grades, than students with no tenure gap who had not participated in an internship prior to graduation. Despite these benefits of internship participation, such participation has the potential to result in a tenure gap when faced with conflicting schedules and financial demands (Hora et al., 2020a; Lei & Yin, 2019).

This may well have been the case for Allen, had the internship program not provided financial support.

The nontraditional student participants in this study experienced interrole conflict as they engaged in their internships. In her research concerning persistence of nontraditional students, Markle (2105) determined that approximately three-quarters of her student participants experienced moderate to very high levels of interrole conflict. Markle's recommendations included expanded course offerings, increased access to faculty, improved advising, and on-campus childcare. Interrole conflict was mitigated for the participants in this study by flexibility in the total number and scheduling of internship hours, remote completion of internship hours, and personal support from loved ones. Personal support in the form of childcare was of particular importance.

Limitations and Delimitations

The objective of this study was to better understand how nontraditional students enrolled in community college conceptualize their internship experience. The use of IPA allowed for the participants' voices to be heard through the rich narratives they provided. However, all research studies encounter limitations and delimitations. Each are presented below.

Limitations

The small sample size of this study limits the findings in multiple ways. First, it made it difficult to compare participants' experiences by specific demographics, such as age or gender. Similarly, the sample size did not allow for concentration on certain participant features. For example, two participants were business majors, one participant was a music major, and one participant was a nursing major. Likewise, two participants

were enrolled at NECC, and two were recent NECC graduates. Additionally, two participants completed their internship remotely while two did not. As such, no understanding is gained regarding internship benefits in one discipline or field versus another. It is also unknown how differences, such as online internship completion or postgraduation reflection impacts internship participation.

The sample size, as noted above, and study site also limit transferability of the results to other institutions. The study took place in a large public, 2-year institution located in a sizeable city in the northeastern United States. Internship programs and student engagement may differ in smaller institutions, 4-year institutions, and institutions located in rural areas. The issues limiting transferability are offset to some degree, however, due to the detail provided in this study. Detailed descriptions of the participants, research setting, and internship program allows readers to make inferences about extrapolating the data, or portions thereof, to their research settings.

Researcher bias may also be a limitation. As noted in Chapter 3, the researcher in this study was the key research instrument. Given the researcher's personal experience as a nontraditional undergraduate student, and professional experience implementing an internship program in an adult degree completion program, she shared experiences, roles, or characteristics with the study participants. The researcher, therefore, has close knowledge of the research context. Insider status can be beneficial, as it can enhance the breadth and depth of researchers' understanding of the population they are studying as well as the participants' responses. It does raise concerns, however, about objectivity and authenticity of results (Bourke, 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Bracketing, referred to as temporarily setting aside one's assumptions, and reflexivity are important tools to address

these concerns. With respect to IPA, specifically, Alase (2017) stated that the only time in which bracketing must take place is when designing and conducting interviews. As such, content validity of the interview questions was established through peer review prior to the commencement of interviews. Throughout the research design, data collection, and data analysis processes, the researcher also engaged in reflective practice to mitigate undue influence of personal assumptions.

Lastly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom videoconferencing. Insights regarding the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing Zoom for qualitative data collection were gathered from Archibald et al. (2019). These researchers noted disagreement in the literature regarding the ability to build rapport with study participants in online platforms. The users' experiences may also be impacted based upon their diverse digital experiences and capacity. Connection and quality issues may also present challenges. Despite this, Archibald et al. (2019) found that the challenges potentially encountered were significantly outweighed by the benefits of utilizing Zoom for qualitative data collection.

Delimitations

This study sought specifically to discover how nontraditional students perceived situational and institutional factors as impacting their internship engagement. Therefore, the research design and scope bounded the study to some degree. Participant criteria included nontraditional students who had engaged in paid internships while enrolled in community college. Therefore, the participant criteria excluded traditional students, students (traditional or nontraditional) enrolled in 4-year institutions, and students (traditional or nontraditional) who engaged in unpaid internships. Likewise, the

participant criteria excluded institutional agents, such as administrators, faculty, and staff associated with NECC's paid internship program. As such, their perceptions are not included. In addition, although the interview questions were designed to illuminate situational and institutional factors impacting internship participation, they also elicited, in some instances, data beyond the scope of this research. While discussion of such data is included in this study, time constraints did not allow for more in-depth examination.

Recommendations

This study provides recommendations for practitioners as well as future research. These recommendations are based upon this study's literature review and findings. Consideration was also given to the implications of those findings, as discussed above. Recommendations for postsecondary administrators, faculty, and staff involved in internship program design and implementation are presented first.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The purpose of this study was to understand how situational and institutional factors influenced internship participation for nontraditional students. The challenges that nontraditional students encounter in their educational pursuits, which may be due to their responsibilities and demands outside of school, can likewise challenge their participation in internships. As such, internship program design must acknowledge and accommodate for these challenges. Based on this study's literature review and findings, four key components were identified to meet the needs of nontraditional students: financial support, flexibility, value of internship opportunities, and quality interactions with institutional agents and peers. Financial support includes financial assistance for tuition, textbooks, transportation, and/or childcare. Flexibility is conceptualized in different

ways, including the number of hours required, work schedules, and delivery mode. Value of internship opportunities are a reflection of the volume and quality of the partnerships developed between the institution and participating organizations.

Financial Support. As previously stated, Hora et al. (2020b) showed that financial hardship impeded internship participation. Some students in their study expressed that unpaid internship participation simply was not possible, due to their financial responsibilities. Allen was ultimately able to engage in an internship in lieu of finding part-time employment, due to the compensation provided in the paid internship program at NECC. When discussing his need to find that employment, he expressed a deep concern that he might be forced to “dip out” of his studies if he were unable to find something that would work around his school schedule. Also previously mentioned, Routon and Walker (2019) posited that the increased time demand of internship participation often leads to students reducing credit loads or taking time off from college study in order to complete an internship experience.

Their study findings indicate that students who participated in an internship without a tenure gap were more likely to be satisfied with their overall college experience and graduate with higher grades, as compared to students who had no tenure gaps and did not participate in an internship. This suggests that creating opportunities for nontraditional students to engage in internships without impacting their degree completion trajectory would improve student outcomes for nontraditional students. This can be achieved with hourly compensation and travel stipends. In the case of fully online programs, Wi-Fi stipends should also be considered. The increase in degree completions

linked to financial assistance for tuition, textbooks, and childcare were previously demonstrated in the program studies discussed in the Implications section of this chapter.

Flexibility. According to Lei and Yin (2019), scheduling was identified as a barrier to student internship participation when the participants were unable to find placements that did not conflict with the time required for paid employment, study, or family obligations. Markle (2015) examined the factors that influenced persistence among nontraditional students. In her study, approximately one-third of the nontraditional students experienced moderate levels of interrole conflict, and 43% experienced high to very high levels of interrole conflict. More than one-third of the respondents considered withdrawing from school, suggesting that situational factors pose a significant threat to nontraditional student persistence. Indeed, all four participants in this study expressed experiences that centered around this study's second superordinate theme of scheduling and time management.

Emma was able to balance her schedule by setting her internship schedule herself and taking evening courses. Similarly, a key factor in Melanie's positive internship experience was a supervisor who allowed for flexibility in her internship hours and who was understanding when Melanie was faced with transportation delays. Both Allen and Melanie noted that the number of hours required for the internship were manageable, as they did not equate to full-time employment. Osam et al. (2017) identified flexibility in course offerings as beneficial to mitigating situational and institutional barriers. Specific examples offered were evening courses and online courses that students could access and complete at any time of the day. The ability of online access to mitigate interrole conflict for Allen and Steven was previously discussed. Internship programs, and academic

programs in general, should be designed to offer multiple modes of delivery as well as evening and weekend courses. Flexibility would also be increased by offering internship opportunities throughout the academic year, including the winter and summer sessions.

Value of Internship Opportunities. Institutions, participating organizations, and students all must understand the expectations they have of each other. While the volume of internship opportunities enhances student selection from a career exploration and scheduling standpoint, volume must not be achieved at the expense of quality. Staff administering internship programs must collect student feedback regarding their internship experiences. Organizations that were routinely found to provide little more than menial work assignments should be reminded of the expectations of partnership and removed from the internship program if expectations continue to be unmet.

Across all of this study's data sets, the value of experience was repeatedly expressed in one of two ways. First, all four participants demonstrated a perception that experience gained through internship participation had value to them professionally. Knowles (1972, 1978) theorized that adult learners are motivated by professional skills development and a desire for learning that relates to real-world contexts. As such, experiential learning that does not allow for the construction of applicable knowledge, and immediacy in the application of such, is deemed of little value to nontraditional students. All of the study participants believed that internship engagement would enhance their resumes and that they would likely improve their postgraduation employment.

Online internship opportunities with notable companies that are not geographically accessible would also be recommended. This could be of particular importance to institutions who, regionally, do not have physical access to a diverse or

large number of organizations. Identifying potential internship sites; creating partnerships; updating the internship site with new opportunities; articulating internship participation expectations to organizations, faculty, staff, and students; and obtaining and analyzing student feedback regarding their internship experiences requires sufficient staffing. Lack of sufficient staffing would serve to diminish the value of internship opportunities to participating students.

Quality Interactions with Institutional Agents and Peers. Research has directly linked student engagement to student persistence (Barbera et al. (2020). Troester-Trate (2020) agreed with this finding, however, she noted that nontraditional students have reported lower levels of engagement due to their life circumstances. This underscores the importance of incorporating frequent, accessible, and meaningful interactions with faculty, staff, and peers into internship programming. The participants' interactions with different aspects of internship programming at NECC highlighted opportunities for student engagement. With respect to learning about the paid internship program, two of the participants learned about it by receiving all-campus emails from the internship coordinator. One of these participants also attended an information session. One participant learned of the internship program while seeking employment opportunities through a different department. The last participant was exposed to the internship program in the student services center.

It is of interest to note that one of the participants strongly felt that more awareness should be brought to the program by emphasizing it in new and transfer student orientations. He was unsure if the paid internship program was mentioned in the orientation that he attended. He remarked that if it was and he could not recall it, then it

was not sufficiently emphasized. The discussion of how the participants learned of the internship program offers different examples of how the internship department engaged and informed students about its opportunities. According to Astin (1984), the effectiveness of any education practice or policy is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement.

Two other features of the internship program at NECC illuminated examples of student engagement. First, all four participants discussed the process of securing an internship. Each described the process as similar to finding and applying for a job online, however, this process fostered frequent involvement with the internship department website and staff. As previously noted, the participants accessed a portal to search for and apply to internship opportunities. All four participants conveyed their interactions with staff during this process. These interactions included emails making them aware of opportunities that may be of interest to them as well as assistance with updating or refining their resumes. Overall, all the participants described the process as “easy.”

Second, all four participants noted the required course that was associated with internship participation at NECC. When comparing the participants’ experiences with the course, a lack of student engagement was revealed. Only one participant perceived the course as beneficial to professional skills development. This participant also appreciated the support received from staff during the class meetings. Another participant did not see the value in the course, although they did appreciate reading other students’ reflections on their experience. Two of the participants provided no detail about the course design or curriculum. Kolb (2005) emphasized that experiential learning curriculum should be designed to move students along a continuum of engaging in experience, reflecting upon

that experience to create new inferences, and testing those inferences to cultivate new learning that can be applied to future experiences. Incorporating this process into an internship course would not only enhance the internship learning experience, but it would also promote student-staff engagement as well as student-student engagement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Hora et al. (2020b) stated that little is known about internship programs in 2-year institutions, or the barriers that impede internship participation for the student populations that they serve. These researchers also noted that much of the discussion surrounding employability focuses heavily on the voices of policymakers and the business community, but it is remarkably devoid of student voices. Therefore, it is recommended that additional research be conducted on students' perceptions of internship participation while enrolled in community college. Additional qualitative studies would contribute nuanced phenomenological data as well as case or program studies to the literature.

In addition to gathering student perceptions of internship participation in general, it is important to better understand students' perceptions of both paid and unpaid internship participation. Given this study's findings, additional research exploring aspects of student participation in both types of internship experience and their levels of satisfaction with each would be beneficial. Likewise, given this study's unexpected findings relating to career exploration, additional research exploring the correlation between career exploration and nontraditional student satisfaction with internship participation is also recommended.

Larger, quantitative studies relating to this research problem are also recommended for numerous reasons. Quantitative studies would prove useful in

understanding internship participation more specifically based upon student population and/or demographics. In addition, studies exploring the correlation between internship participation and persistence of nontraditional students is recommended. Surveys widely distributed to current students and graduates who have participated in internship programs would result in a significant amount of data. Both of these benefits of quantitative research would foster generalizability of the results.

It is anticipated that internship programming designed to support nontraditional students may incur added costs. Scrivener et al. (2015) determined that the added costs associated with their program resulted in an increase in full-time enrollments and increased degree completions, thereby reducing the institutions' cost per graduate. Similarly, Ishitani and Kamer (2020) found that increases in student services expenditures and full-time students led to increased graduation rates in certain community college classifications. Therefore, additional research is also recommended regarding the costs and benefits of specialized programs and internship programs shown to improve student persistence at other institutions. These findings may be useful to postsecondary administrators with their program design and/or as a justification of expenditures.

Lastly, additional research regarding online delivery of internship programs and related services is recommended. These findings would contribute to the literature regarding the benefits and drawbacks of online learning for nontraditional students, in general, as well as online services such as academic advising and career counseling. It would also contribute to the literature regarding online experiential learning such as fieldwork and clinical training. In addition, the use of telehealth services, both physical

and mental, has become increasingly utilized in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further research relating to the efficacy of online counseling services and nontraditional students' experiences with such services is therefore also recommended.

Conclusion

Ample research has demonstrated that nontraditional students are no longer nontraditional on college campuses, as they now make up approximately 75% of postsecondary enrollments (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019). As adults over the age of 24, or young adults with adult responsibilities, nontraditional students have differing needs than their traditional counterparts. These unique needs stem from the multiple roles they fill, beyond that of being a student. The challenges associated with managing these multiple roles often leads to situational barriers. Situational factors are tied to nontraditional students' familial, residential, financial, and personal circumstances. Their unique life circumstances may also present challenges to their institutional engagement. Institutional barriers relate to institutional policies and practices, curriculum planning, and student services.

Both situational and institutional barriers have the potential to impact student persistence, identified as "continued enrollment" in any postsecondary institution, which in turn could impact degree completion for this large population. Situational barriers often lead to part-time enrollment status for nontraditional students (Kamer & Ishitani, 2020; Kasworm, 2018), which spells a problem. Juskiewicz (2020) found that students with an exclusively part-time enrollment status experienced withdrawal rates twice that of students who attended full-time. Understanding and mitigating these challenges could be of particular significance to community college administrators, as roughly two-thirds

of community college students are classified as nontraditional (Kasworm, 2018; MacDonald, 2018).

Career and financial advancement are key reasons that nontraditional students enroll in postsecondary education (Chen, 2017; Dikhtyar et al., 2020; Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). Career-oriented programs often include required fieldwork or practicums. In general, The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017) found that at least 60% of students participated in an internship and/or co-op in each year since 2013, while enrolled in college. Experiential learning aligns strongly with adult learners' motivation for and orientation to learning. They desire problem-centered learning that has immediate application to their societal roles (Knowles, 1972, 1978). However, there is little research regarding how nontraditional students conceptualize their internship experience overall. More specifically, it is unknown how the situational and institutional factors they experience as nontraditional students impact their participation in this mode of learning.

The purpose of this study was to examine how, if at all, situational and/or institutional factors impacted internship participation by nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges. Currently, ample research exists regarding nontraditional students and student experiences with internships as discrete topics. Research performed at the intersection of these two topics is very limited. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study included ALT and ELT. ALT (Knowles, 1972, 1978) suggests that adult learners desire a learning process that values their experience, recognizes and fosters their developmental maturity and life roles, and allows for hands-on learning. ELT (Kolb, 2005, Kolb & Kolb, 2017) is a holistic model of experiential learning and adult

development, synthesizing the works of foundation scholars in the fields of human development and learning. ELT suggests that knowledge is constructed by both comprehending and converting experience (Kolb, 2005).

With consideration given to the research problem and theoretical frameworks noted above, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experiences?
2. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?
3. How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2011) was utilized to understand the participants' lived experiences of their internship participation as well as how they made meaning of those experiences. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with four nontraditional students who had completed a semester-long internship while enrolled in a public community college in the northeastern United States. The first phase of coding conducted on the interview transcripts was performed manually to develop open codes and identify themes. Data analysis was refined through a second phase of coding, conducted utilizing Quirkos qualitative software. This process identified three overarching categories (career attainment, interrole conflict, institutional engagement), three superordinate themes (value of experience, scheduling and time management,

internship programming), and three subordinate themes (key internship benefits, personal support, career exploration). These categories and themes provided the framework by which the research questions were answered.

Research Question 1: *How do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience?* The decision to attend college and participate in an internship was motivated by the participants' societal roles and expectations. Career preparation and attainment served to support their financial independence and familial responsibilities. The internship experience was found to be important to the study participants in two ways. Career exposure and experience was thought to enhance the participants' resumes and postgraduate employment opportunities. In addition, the value of internship work assignments, or lack thereof, was directly related to the quality of work assigned. Surprisingly, the compensation or stipends associated with the paid internship program did not appear of significance to the participants, despite the fact that they exhibited some degree of financial need.

Research Question 2: *How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their situational circumstances as impacting their internship completion?* Financial demands were observed to be a key factor in the interrole conflict experienced by all the participants. The challenge of balancing school, work, and home responsibilities were expressed in numerous responses. Transportation was observed to exacerbate the challenges in some cases, based upon length of commute time and periodic delays in public transportation. Ultimately, flexibility in scheduling and access to online courses helped to alleviate interrole conflict. Personal support, primarily in the form of childcare, was also a key factor in conflict mitigation.

Research Question 3: *How, if at all, do nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive institutional supports as impacting their internship experience from the time of contemplation to completion?* Institutional engagement was observed to be an overarching category across the data sets. The participants conveyed the types and frequency of communication between themselves and internship staff on many occasions. They also expressed meaningful interactions with departmental staff as well as internship supervisors. Two programmatic features were highlighted by the participants. First, they all equated the process of searching, applying, and interviewing for the internship to that of doing so for real-world job opportunities. Likewise, all participants noted the volume of internship opportunities that were available to NECC students, which positively impacted their selection process. A third programmatic feature, the associated internship course, was only viewed positively by one participant. Elements of career exploration were also observed in the participant responses.

This study contributes to the literature by adding nuanced phenomenological data that can assist higher education administrators, faculty, and staff in designing and implementing internship programs that are accessible and valuable to nontraditional student learners. Such curricular design could also be incorporated into other courses and across degree programs. Adult learners' strong alignment with experiential learning is an asset that can be leveraged to improve persistence for nontraditional students. Improved persistence could lead to increased degree completions that would benefit not only the nontraditional student but society as a whole.

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Appendix A

Researcher's Introduction Email/Letter and Study Information

Dear Student,

My name is Kathleen Ceng. I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education, I am conducting a research study. The topic of my study is how nontraditional students enrolled in community college perceive their internship experience.

Participants invited to join this study must meet a pre-established set of criteria. These criteria include (a) be currently enrolled or have been previously enrolled at North East Community College, (b) be identified as a nontraditional student, and (c) have completed an internship while enrolled. Nontraditional students are identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time attendance, being a single parent or having other dependents, being financially independent from their parents, working full-time while enrolled, or not receiving a standard high school diploma.

If fully eligible, I would like to ask you to participate by allowing me to interview you. I am interested in how you describe your internship experience. The interview would be conducted virtually via Zoom. It is not necessary to have a Zoom account to participate. The approximate interview length will be 60 minutes. If necessary, one follow-up interview lasting no more than 30 minutes may be scheduled for the purpose of clarifying your responses. The interview(s) will be recorded. Your authorization of the interview recording is required for participation. In addition, you will also be asked to complete the attached Demographic Form.

In appreciation of your participation, you will be provided with a \$25 Visa eGift card at the completion of the interview. I have attached an Informed Consent Form that provides additional information relating to the study and confidentiality. Should you decide to participate, this information will be reviewed with you and your signature obtained on the Informed Consent Form prior to commencing the interview. The completed Demographic Form will be collected prior to the interview. If you would like to participate, please contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. You may also contact me if you should have any questions or concerns regarding the study.

Sincerely,
Kathleen Ceng
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Demographic Form

Complete the following questionnaire. You may choose to skip any question(s).

Name: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Age: _____

What gender do you identify as?

Male _____ Female _____ Self Identification: _____

Please specify your ethnicity:

White _____

African-American _____

Latino or Hispanic _____

Asian _____

American Indian or Alaska Native _____

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander _____

Two or More Races _____

Unknown _____

Are you currently enrolled in college: Yes _____ No _____

If Yes, what is your enrollment status: Full-Time _____ Part-Time _____

If previously enrolled in college, what was your enrollment status (check all that apply):

Full-Time _____ Part-Time _____

Last semester attended:

Date graduated High School (month/year):

Date first enrolled in College (month/year):

While a college student, are/were you considered financially independent for Financial Aid purposes?

Yes _____ No _____ Unsure _____ Not Applicable _____

While a college student, are/were you a Pell recipient or Pell eligible?

Yes _____ No _____ Unsure _____ Not Applicable _____

Did/do you have any dependents while enrolled in college? Yes _____ No _____

Did/do you work full-time (36 hours per week or more) while attending college?

Yes _____ No _____

Please list the organization and department where your internship took place:

Dates of internship (from month/year to month/year):

Number of hours completed at the internship site:

Please identify your major or academic program:

Was your internship required for your academic program: Yes _____ No _____

Appendix C

SJFC IRB Informed Consent Form for Adults



St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

Perceptions of Internship Participation by Nontraditional Students Enrolled in Community College

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of how nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges perceive their internship experience. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
 - The purpose of this study is to discover how nontraditional students participating in college internships conceptualize their experience from pre-enrollment to completion.
- Approximately 6-8 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a doctoral thesis and contribute to the current body of research related to nontraditional students' perceptions of internship participation.
- If you agree to take part in this study, your total participation time is estimated at two hours over the course of approximately 1 month.
- You will be asked to complete a Demographic Form (attached), which should take no more than 30 minutes. One interview will be conducted, lasting approximately 60 minutes but no longer than 90 minutes. If necessary, one follow-up interview lasting no more than 30 minutes will be conducted. The interview(s) will take place virtually via Zoom. Participants do not need to have a Zoom account to participate.
- We believe that this study has no more than minimal risk. The virtual interviews will be recorded and transcribed. More detail will be provided in the Procedures section of this form.
- You may not directly benefit from this research, however, we hope that your participation in the study may contribute to research regarding internship participation by

nontraditional students. Literature regarding the experiences of such participation specifically by nontraditional students enrolled in community college is limited.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of how nontraditional students conceptualize their college internship participation. This study is being conducted at North East Community College. Participants will be interviewed virtually via Zoom. This study is being conducted by Kathleen Ceng, Ed.D. candidate in the Ralph C. Wilson School of Education at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in or have completed an internship experience, and you meet the definition of a nontraditional student. Nontraditional students are identified by one or more of the following characteristics: over the age of 24; delayed enrollment in postsecondary education; part-time attendance; being a single parent or having other dependents; being financially independent from their parents; working full-time while enrolled; or not receiving a standard high school diploma.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study. Contact Information is provided in the Contacts, Referral, and Questions section of this form.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete the attached Demographic Form and submit it via email to the researcher.
- The researcher will contact you to schedule an interview at a convenient date and time for you.
- Electronically sign this Informed Consent form, in both areas requiring signatures, and submit the signed form via email to the researcher prior to commencement of the interview. The researcher will provide you with a fully executed copy (containing all required signatures) for your records prior to commencement of the interview.
- Participate in an interview of approximately sixty minutes in length, but no longer than 90 minutes.
- Participate in one follow-up interview lasting no more than 30 minutes, if necessary, for the purpose of clarifying your initial interview responses. The researcher will contact you within approximately 2 weeks to schedule the follow-up interview, if necessary.
- The interview(s) will take place virtually via Zoom. The researcher will email you a link to access the interview at the predetermined date and time.
- The interview will be video recorded and transcribed. Consent to be video recorded is required for participation in the research study. The recording will be deleted upon the researcher's successful defense of their dissertation. All other documents, including interview transcripts, will be shredded or deleted as described in the Confidentiality section below.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will receive compensation for your participation. Upon conclusion of your interview, you will receive a \$25 VISA eGift Card via email from the researcher. A follow-up interview, if required, is included in the anticipated participation and will not result in additional compensation.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Each interview will be recorded and transcriptions generated via the Zoom platform. A second researcher will be provided with one interview transcript, identified with a pseudonym, for analysis. The sole purpose of this activity is to compare their findings with that of the primary researcher, in an effort to establish reliability of the findings. When not in use, any video and electronic files of the data will be stored on a password protected laptop accessible only to the researcher. Identifiable research records will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher.

All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding or deleting three years after the successful defense of the dissertation.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future grades, services, or class standing with at North East Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study is Kathleen Ceng. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or _____@sjfc.edu. You may also contact the researcher's advisors identified below:

Dr. Carla Smith - Dissertation Chairperson
(xxx) xxx-xxxx or _____@sjfc.edu

Dr. Angela Rios - Committee Member
(xxx) xxx-xxxx or _____@sjfc.edu

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 the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

I agree to be videorecorded/transcribed _____ Yes _____ No
If answering No, I understand that I will not be eligible to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

A fully executed copy of this informed consent will be provided for your records.

Appendix D

Quirkos Visual Representation of Identified Themes and Frequency

