A Comparison of Face-to-Face On-Campus and Distance Education Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Learner Students' Academic, Social, and Environmental Needs in the Collegiate Setting

by

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Abstract

With the continued growth of nontraditional adult learners in both the on-campus and distance education environments over the past few decades, there has come an ever-increasing need for further research in regards to the specific needs of these student populations. The purpose of this study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face on-campus nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. This study used quantitative research measures in its design through the use of an electronic online survey. The survey, with a stratified random sample of 498 part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting, was used to measure responses to each of the research questions. The sample for this study consisted of one independent variable which was the learning environment (either distance or face-to-face); the dependent variables were the academic, social, and environmental needs scales. The results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test indicated that no significant interaction existed between distance education nontraditional adult learners as compared to face-to-face on-campus nontraditional adult learner in regards to academic and environmental needs in the collegiate setting. However, the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test did indicate that a significant interaction existed between distance education nontraditional adult learners as compared to face-to-face on-campus nontraditional adult learner in regards to social needs in the collegiate setting.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The nontraditional adult college and university student population has seen tremendous increases in growth over the past few decades. In the United States alone, the nontraditional adult student population in the college and university setting increased to 4.9 million by the late 1980s, with students over the age of 25 accounting for 44% of higher education enrollments by the mid-1990s (Maehl, 2004). It was expected that this number would increase to 6.8 million students by the year 2010 (Hardin, 2008). By the late-1990s, 73% of undergraduate students were considered non-traditional in some way (Dwyer, Thompson, & Thompson, 2013). Many of these students were working full-time and financially independent (Choy, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) projections of higher education enrollments from 2007–2018 suggested that the number of non-traditional student enrollments will continue to increase during the current decade (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Much of these increases in the nontraditional adult student population in the United States have been attributed to the growth of distance education programs at the college and university levels (Holmberg, 1995).

Terminology related to adult education and adult learners has evolved over the years indicating a possible shift in educational perspectives and teacher-learner practices (Malinkvski, Vasileva-Stojanovska, Jovevski, Vasileva, & Trajkovik, 2015). This could be due in part to the fact that adult learners are finding ways to continue their education through various forms of learning which provide them with information and knowledge in specific areas of study, all

while not constricting the learner to the traditional walls of the college classroom setting (Malinkvski et al., 2015).

Marshall Smith, former Acting Deputy Secretary of Education with the United States Department of Education, suggested that distance education was changing the fundamental delivery constraints of higher education as we know it (Carnevale, 2000). Distance learning is becoming a more popular choice as nontraditional adult college students become a larger segment of the post-secondary student population (Dwyer et al., 2013). In 2007, distance education programs accounted for 12.2 million student enrollments and 89% of public four-year universities offered college level distance education courses (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). With this in mind, colleges and universities are beginning to view distance education programs as a way of sustaining growth, especially with the nontraditional adult learner population (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008).

Academic Needs

In over a twenty year span, the number of adult education courses has increased from 2.6 million to 6.8 million as a response to the demand of adult learners' desires further their educational pursuits (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990). And as colleges and universities are attracting an increasing population of adult learners at present, research suggests that most of the nontraditional adult student population is not in possession of the traditional academic requirements for furthering their educations which more traditional students possess when entering this type of collegiate environment (Watters, 2003). As a result of the increased in enrollment, an investigation into the academic, social, and environmental needs of this student population can be of great importance for administrators and educators alike. Further, this exploration will help educators to avoid the one-size-fits-all model of academic instruction which

research shows as detrimental to student learning successes; doing so will also help to better meet the individual needs of nontraditional adult distance education and face-to-face students (Chulup & Collins, 2010).

Social Needs

The social needs of adult learners are often overlooked in the distance education setting. Hrastinski (2008) has investigated the importance of the communication media (asynchronous and synchronous) as key factors in transforming the focus on e-learners as individuals to e-learners as social participants during the lifelong learning process. However, Galbraith and Shedd (2010) found that one of the most essential and vital components of any teacher-learner transaction should be to build a positive psycho-social educational climate. Additionally, Knox (1986) indicated that establishing a conducive psychological climate in any classroom is imperative to the student learning experience. Knox (1986) continued that the climate must be created in a way that is supportive, friendly, informal, and open without being threatening or condescending; the same could be said for face-to-face classrooms as well.

Further, Rendon (1994) suggested that nontraditional adult learners are not likely to become involved on their own and that educators must work to create such dynamic social environments in their classrooms. At present, the social needs of nontraditional adult students are a topic which provides limited knowledge, especially for those students who are enrolled in courses through distance educational means. Investigating what the actual social needs are for nontraditional adult students both in the face-to-face and distance education setting could aid educators and administrators in better tailoring courses, programs, policies, and other elements of the collegiate process and social environments to best meet these nontraditional adult learners' social needs.

Environmental Needs

Research notes that many nontraditional adult learners benefit from the substantial amount of additional support colleges are able to provide to such students (Watters, 2003). However, one study which examined the environmental needs of this student learner population found that over 50 percent of the adult learner population felt that they have to make do with barely adequate resources at best and that in some instances, the resources given to them by the college or university were simply unsuitable (Watters, 2003). Perhaps this may be an element of diversity with nontraditional adult students. Some are simply older students seeking to complete their college educations while others may be unemployed, employed at present, returning to the job market, or even individuals facing retirement (Watters, 2003). Such students often are seeking to advance their educations due to a vast array of motives, expectations, and purposes (Watters, 2003). Therefore, a better understanding of the specific environmental needs of nontraditional adult distance education students as compared to nontraditional adult face-to-face on-campus students could assist in course and program design within the college and university settings.

Statement of the Research Problem

As the popularity of distance education courses with nontraditional adult students continues to rise in the college and university settings, faculty and administrative staff will need to continue to explore the academic, social, and environmental needs of this specific student population as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting. While there is an abundance of research examining these variables in the more traditional face-to-face classroom environment, there is a lack of research in terms of nontraditional adult student needs in the distance education setting. Examining the stated academic, social, and environmental

needs of these adult learners in a distance education as compared to the more traditional face-to-face setting will aid colleges and universities in obtaining better insights into this ever-growing student population.

Further, a better understanding of these academic, social, and environmental nontraditional adult learner needs from the distance education and face-to-face standpoints is an important aspect in working to create learning environments which are more conducive to helping these students meet and possibly exceed their educational goals. This study examines undergraduate nontraditional adult learners' stated academic, social, and environmental needs in the distance education learning environment compared to the academic, social, and environmental needs of face-to-face nontraditional adult learner undergraduate students.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding the needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting is vital as colleges and universities are working to expand distance educational offerings and programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face on-campus nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. This study identifies the differences in academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education environment as compared to nontraditional adult students in the face-to-face setting. There is a need for this research as the academic, social, and environmental needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner populations have yet to be fully explored, especially in the distance education setting.

This study had three primary goals: (1) to determine the academic needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus setting; (2) to determine the social needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus setting; and (3) to determine the environmental needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus setting.

Significance of the Study

This study examined the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face learning environment. At present, there is a lack of research in this area as the specific needs of these nontraditional adult learners have yet to be fully explored. By focusing on these academic, social, and environmental needs, distance education and traditional on-campus programs in the college and university settings can work to better serve the specific needs of the nontraditional adult learner student population.

This study is significant in that it determined what the academic needs are for both part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in distance education courses as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus setting. The study is also significant in that it examined the social needs for both part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in distance education courses as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting. Additionally, the study is significant because it established actual environmental needs

for both part-time and full-time learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus setting.

The findings presented from this research study can aid colleges and universities with both distance education and traditional on-campus course offerings and programs in better understanding the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners while also helping these colleges and universities prepare for future program planning and course design. College and university faculty, administrators, and course designers will find this information useful in helping them to meet set learning objectives while also creating a learning environment which best meets the needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner student populations. The results of this study will also provide insight into the similarities and differences in academic, social, and environmental needs of face-to-face and distance education undergraduate nontraditional adult learners in the academic setting.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

2. What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

3. What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

Limitations and Assumptions

Limitations

1. This research study examined students from only community college student populations in the southern and Midwestern portions of the United States. Further, this limited sample may not allow generalizability of the results to other colleges and different geographical locations.
2. This study was limited to adult learners that were over the age of 19 years old and attending distance learning and/or on-campus courses in the collegiate setting.
3. This study was limited to the information collected from the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire, which was based in part, on the Adult Learner Needs Survey.

Assumptions

1. The participants of the study will understand the instrument administered for data collect and will answer all questions posed as accurately and honestly as possible.
2. Participant responses to the questions regarding their academic, social, and environmental needs will be reflective of their own personal experiences with distance education and/or face-to-face courses in the collegiate setting.

Definition of Terms

Academic needs: These needs, in terms of this research study, are defined as areas of the educational process which could affect student learning. These variables include but are not limited to: courses offered, tutoring services, methods of instructional delivery, remedial courses, faculty accessibility, and the teaching-learning process.

Community college: A two-year college who's primary goal is to serve the needs of the citizens in its community in either learning a skill, trade, or preparing to enter a university setting.

Distance education/distance learning: A planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide array of technologies to reach learners at a distance. Such educational programs are designed to free students from the necessity of traveling to a physical fixed campus location and/or course meetings at specific times. Students and teachers may be separated by distance only or even by distance and time.

Environmental needs: These needs, in terms of this research study, are defined as needs or variables which encompass the external learning environment for adult learners. These needs include financial aid assistance, online library services, disability accommodations, job placement, career development, and support systems from family/friends.

Faculty: Part-time or full-time instructors who are employed at a college and/or university

Full-time student: A male or female student who is enrolled in at least 12 credit hours or more in an academic semester.

Nontraditional Adult Learner/Student: A male or female student over the age of 19 years old who meets any of the following criteria: financially independent student; employed full-time; postponed postsecondary education enrollment; married; person with dependents; a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college; a commuter student; and/or a veteran or active duty member of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives.

Part-time student: A male or female student who is enrolled in less than 12 credit hours in an academic semester.

Social needs: These needs, in terms of this research study, are defined as needs or variables which address relational interactions within the learning environment. These needs include social activities, clubs/organizations, counseling services availability, social interactions with other students, social engagements, creating/building friendships, desire to serve others through community service projects, and a desire to feel that faculty members care about the student on a personal level.

Traditional student: A student which meets the following criteria: enters post-secondary education in the same calendar year that he/she completes high school, financially dependent on others, without children or dependents, single, and is unemployed or employed no more than part-time.

Chapter Summary

Chapter I provides an introduction to the research study, the statement of the research problem, research questions, and key definitions of terms used throughout the paper. Chapter II discusses a review of literature regarding nontraditional adult learner enrollments, characteristics of nontraditional adult students, theoretical frameworks, as well as the needs and challenges of nontraditional adult learner students in the collegiate setting. Chapter III explores the procedures used in the research study including the research study's population and sample, instrument employed, data collection procedures, and measures used for data analyses. Lastly, Chapter IV discusses the research study's findings while Chapter V reveals the summary of the research study, conclusions, implications, and potential areas for further research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In recent years, the number of nontraditional adult college and university students has seen dramatic increases. During the late 1980s, the number of nontraditional adult college and university students was reported to be 4.9 million (Dwyer, Thompson, & Thompson, 2013). However, by the mid-1990s, this adult student population accounted for 44% of college and university student enrollments and by the turn of the century, 73% of undergraduate students were considered nontraditional learners, in some way (Choy, 2002; Maehl, 2004). Many of these students were categorized as nontraditional because they were employed full time, financially independent, had dependents, and/or did not transition directly from high school to the college environment (Choy, 2002).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment levels among nontraditional adult students has continued to rise over the past few decades with recent figures indicating that this nontraditional adult learner student population will potentially account for at least half of all total college and university enrollments (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). And while it was projected that nontraditional adult student enrollments would eventually reach 6.8 million students by 2010, in all actuality, the number was much higher (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990; Hardin, 2008). In fact, the most significant increase in college and university enrollments from 2009 to 2020 is said to be directly from the nontraditional adult learner student population. Specifically, nontraditional adult students who are 25 to 34 years old are projected to have the

highest projected enrollment increases at 21% compared to the more traditional student learner population who is projected to have enrollment increases of only 9% (Hussar & Bailey, 2011).

As can be seen from this research, nontraditional adult learners constitute a significant percentage of the overall student population on most college campuses (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). In fact, it has been said that five out of six college students are currently part-time, commuting adults who are struggling to juggle their roles in the higher education setting with the roles they play in their personal and professional lives (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

With such increases in the enrollments trends of the nontraditional adult learner student population, one must look at the why behind these increases. With many of these students choosing to pursue their first postsecondary programs with the goal of earning an associate or bachelor's degree, it does leave one to wonder why these students are deciding to embark on this academic journey.

Kohl (2010) believes that there are quite a few factors which are encouraging adults to return to the classroom setting. Kohl (2010) felt that a few of these factors could be the need for updated skill sets in order to be more competitive in the modern-day, knowledge-based economy or perhaps changes in overall societal demographics due to immigration law changes and/or even increasing retirement ages. However, other such factors might also be the various technological advancements seen in more recent years which are allowing students to complete college courses and degree programs without the restrictions of traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms (Kohl, 2010). Another possible factor might be the overall globalization of the higher education system as a whole (Kohl, 2010).

However, some scholars believe that these increases in nontraditional adult student enrollments might be due to factors yet to be fully understood. No matter what the motivation

for returning to the classroom for these nontraditional adult learners, one thing that is almost for certain is that these students are all facing one or more transitions in their personal and/or professional lives (Hardin, 2008). For some of these students, this new transition into the role of student is seen in a positive manner as these students are working to prepare for new career opportunities, advancements, or even retirement (Hardin, 2008). For nontraditional adult students though, this transition might not be so favorable as it might be due, at least in part, to negative life experiences such as corporate downsizing, the realization that they are no longer able to compete in the job market without some form of advanced education, loss of ability to perform current career, and more (Hardin, 2008). For nontraditional adult learners who are experiencing such hardships, beginning their new role as college students can be an additional stressor as many have recently lost employment positions and even household incomes. Some of these students are deciding to enroll in college courses/programs as a result of recently losing a spouse due to divorce or even death. Thus, they are now forced to enter the college setting as a way of working to maintain or even improve their current financial situations (Hardin, 2008).

Another reason that some of these students are choosing to attend college could be due to the fact that their roles are changing in the family. While some nontraditional adult students choose to enter college due to the financial difficulties they are experiencing in their personal lives, others are choosing to do so simply because their children have started their own educational journeys or have left home as they are now young adults. Allen (1993) notes that in many cases, female nontraditional adult students often choose to return to college as a way of working to provide future support for their family.

While many nontraditional adult students are facing the challenge of entering or even re-entering the higher education setting, many are also working to juggle other obligations such as

parenting roles, careers, professional/personal responsibilities, and more. Further, many are working to financially afford and pay for college at the same time that they are also dealing with a reduced household income due to spousal death, divorce, or perhaps even losing their professional positions (Hardin, 2008). With that in mind, many of these students are choosing to bypass traditional face-to-face university options and instead opt for enrollment in community colleges and/or distance education courses/programs due to accessibility, affordability, and overall convenience (Hardin, 2008). As a result, more than half of community college student enrollments can be attributed to nontraditional adult learners (Frey, 2007).

Still though, not all increases in nontraditional adult student enrollments are attributed to negative life situations. For example, many baby boomers are recently retired or soon to be retired and enrolling in or even returning to higher education institutions to fulfill a long-delayed goal of a first or even an advanced college degree; others simply desire to learn new skills and/or knowledge (Hardin, 2008).

Nontraditional Adult Learner Defined

Throughout the literature, the 'term nontraditional adult learner' has often been used to refer to students who are age 25 or older (Kim, 2002). However, the term has also been defined using certain background characteristics and/or risk factors for this student population (Kim, 2002). In fact, much research uses the terms nontraditional adult learner or nontraditional adult student in reference to quite a variety of student background characteristics such as ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status, current employment situations, and much more (Kim, 2002). For instance, using the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1986, Apling (1991) examined the characteristics of nontraditional adult students in higher education settings and actually compared five groups of nontraditional adult students. Of these five groups, Apling

(1991) classified nontraditional adult students by age (24 years of age and older), financially independent (students financially independent from parental/guardian financial support), student enrollment status, GED/high school diploma completion, and/or if the student had children. Further, when Rendon (2000) considered the term 'nontraditional adult student', lower incomes, first-generation college student status, and even employment status were considered. Rendon (2000) felt that this more inclusive characterization would help to account for the ever-demanding roles of work, family, college, and societal culture in which nontraditional adult students face on a daily basis.

A more recent NCES report (2002) has been cited throughout the literature when the term nontraditional adult student is mentioned. This report more broadly defines the term to include seven characteristics which include enrollment in college delayed by at least one full year following successful completion of high school, having dependents, being a single parent household, full-time employment status, financial independence, enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student, and/or not in possession of a high school diploma. When examining these seven characteristics in comparison to current college student enrollments, it is said that 73 percent of college students could be viewed as nontraditional adult students (Choy, 2002).

However, it is important to note that the term 'nontraditional adult student' is not at all new. In fact, Cross (1981) referred to some of these same students as nontraditional in some way more than thirty years ago. With increases in nontraditional adult student college enrollments though, the term does appear to be more prevalent in today's research. Ross-Gordon (2011) believes that the revitalization of these terms have been due to the social and economic influences which have fueled increases in nontraditional adult learner enrollments on college campuses in the decades since researchers first began to use these terms. Such societal and

economic influences have been described as an increasingly aging and diverse student population, the ever-changing face of technology, as well as the constantly shifting needs and demands in the workplace as part of an increasingly global economy (Ross-Gordon, 2011). It is believed that influences such as these will continue to drive new and re-entry nontraditional adult student enrollments in the future as well.

One vital characteristic which works to distinguish the nontraditional adult learner students from traditional student populations are that nontraditional adult students generally juggle other roles in both their personal and professional lives while enrolled in college. These roles are often those of employee, spouse/partner, parent, caregiver, and community leader/member (Ross-Gordon, 2011). And although the term 'nontraditional adult learner' has been defined in a variety of ways, most scholars agree that those students who meet the characteristics of this student population are those who have experienced any (or perhaps even all) of the following criteria: being a parent or guardian, working as an employee, being married/divorced/widowed, financially independent, being a high school drop-out, and/or delaying college enrollment for at least one year (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). According to the U.S. Department of Education, at least 75 percent of college students meet one or more of these criteria (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002).

It is important to note though that these various roles and life experiences are not always seen as drawbacks for nontraditional adult learners. In fact, it is believed such life roles might even be assets for these nontraditional adult students as they can work to provide social supports as well as deeper life experiences in the classroom environment, all of which may in turn aid to the nontraditional adult learners' creation of meanings through theoretical constructs which might be lost on more traditional student populations (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Further, Ritt

(2008) noted that nontraditional adult learners who are often successful in the collegiate environment are also more likely to gain economic and personal benefits, while working to provide social, political, and economic benefits for society as a whole.

Still though, one must note that the multiple roles which nontraditional adult students play can present difficult challenges in the students' ability to allocate time for both academic study and participation in college organizations and activities (Ross-Gordon, 2011). For example, a NCES (2003) report indicated that over 56 percent of nontraditional adult students viewed themselves as workers first and students second with only 26 percent self-identifying themselves as students who also work (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Only 18 percent of the participants in this study indicated that they did not work and are enrolled in college (Berker & Horn, 2003). The report also found that students who viewed themselves as employees first were more likely to be married, thus leaving them with at least three roles to manage while enrolled in the higher education environment (Berker & Horn, 2003, p. 5). Further, it was this group of "workers first, students second" students who were found to be the least likely to complete their degree in six years' time (Berker & Horn, 2003).

Nontraditional Adult Students vs. Traditional Students

When we think in terms of the actual academic, social, and environmental needs of college students, thoughts on college readiness for nontraditional adult learners can be quite different than that of more traditional students. As research has noted, quite a large part of current undergraduate student populations are considered nontraditional students in some way as many are considered older students, parents, employed, financially independent, and/or students who enroll in college without a traditional high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education NCES, 2002). Further, re-entry adult students' multiple life roles and commitments make it

more likely that these adult learner students will seek degrees and programs which allow them more flexibility in terms of times, schedules, and locations for both course completion and access to needed/desired college and university services (Ross-Gordon, 2011). One striking characteristic of nontraditional adult learners is their vast differences as learners in the higher education setting. Many of these nontraditional adult learners are older students completing their initial education in the college or university environment, returning to the collegiate environment after some time spent away, employed/unemployed, parents returning to the workforce, older adults facing retirement, and/or seeking to improve their current life situations (Watters, 2003). Because these nontraditional adult students are enrolling in colleges and universities for a wide variety of motives, purposes, and expectations, they are generally thought to have vastly different needs from more traditional students in terms of education, guidance, and support (Watters, 2003). But to what extent these needs differ depending on these different student populations has yet to be fully explored.

While research by Richardson and King (1998) felt that claims regarding the special needs of adult learners might be over-stated, there does appear to be features of this nontraditional adult learner student population which might suggest that these learners are, in fact, led to adopt educational goals which are quite different from more traditional students in the collegiate environment. For instance, research notes that there appears to be clear differences between nontraditional adult students and more traditional student populations in the college and university setting (Malinovski, Vasileva-Stojanovska., Jovevski, Vasileva, & Trajkovik, 2015). Adult learners are said to be more motivated by the latest societal trends, are looking to advance in their professions or move into a new career path, looking to satisfy career educational

requirements, and/or acquire new skills and knowledge for more personal goals, all of which are usually stemming from past learning experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998).

Further, the learning conditions under which nontraditional adult learners and more traditional college students' best perform has been debated for quite some time (Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Rachal, 1983). Many scholars feel that nontraditional adult students are more self-directed learners in regards to their education and actually possess an inherently joyful attitude towards the learning process, which can carry over more in terms of determination, commitment, and dedication to educational goals both inside and outside of the classroom setting (Carlan, 2001). Allen (1993) noted that it is important to remember that nontraditional adult student's desire coursework and course materials which can have practical implications and applications in their own lives. Allen (1993) felt that nontraditional adult learners tend to be more focused on the material and often place more value on courses, course content, and assignments which they feel are relevant in some way to their personal and/or professional goals. Because these students are creating time to devote to their academic studies in their already hectic schedules, nontraditional adult students want to clearly know what is expected of them. It is important to this student population that they receive clear, detailed assignment feedback early and often in the term as a way of learning more about the instructor's course expectations (Allen, 1993).

The majority of nontraditional adult learners who enroll in and complete college courses leading to professional qualifications are successful overall (Watters, 2003). Still though, it appears that the challenges faced by nontraditional adult students can be much more prevalent than that in traditional college student populations.

Eastmond (1998) noted that nontraditional adult students must find a proper balance between the increasing demands of their work, education, and personal life situations. With the struggles of such demanding needs and roles, the nontraditional adult student's educational activities have little room to compete with the resources left to the student in terms of time, energy, and finances (Eastmond, 1998; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). Further, the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) noted that although an increasing amount of educators and administrators now recognize the important role that college support services can play in the lives of nontraditional adult students, there appears to still be a misconception present which insinuates that nontraditional adult students are almost completely self-supportive and do not require the same level of support, guidance, and/or interactions as younger, more traditional student populations. As can be seen through the many challenges nontraditional adult students face when trying to complete their educational goals, it can be safe to assume that these students need at least the same level of support as more traditional students, if not more in some cases (Hardin, 2008).

Research revealed that nontraditional adult students, like more traditional college students, experience difficulties when trying to navigate the college or university environment (Brickman & Braun, 1999). However, one distinct difference between the collegiate challenges in these two distinctly different student populations is that nontraditional adult students reportedly more often feel like imposters in the college environment, including on college campuses (Brookfield, 2006). Research also suggests that nontraditional adult learners often experience more feelings of inadequacy towards the extensive use of technology for information gathering, placement testing, registration, and general coursework in the college and/or university environment (Zafft, 2008). Because of these and other pressing challenges,

nontraditional adult students who enroll in postsecondary educational environments are less likely than traditional college students to complete their degree or even remain enrolled in higher education institutions after a five year span (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). In fact, it has even been said that nontraditional adult learners are more likely than their traditional counterparts to drop-out of the collegiate environment within their first year of enrollment with the college or university (Hardin, 2008). Further, Imel (1994) stated that a favorite adage of adult educators is that "adult learners vote with their feet," meaning that when faced with the many challenges and learning environments which do not meet the nontraditional adult student's needs, these students simply stop attending classes and even drop-out of their institutions altogether (p. 5).

However, in more recent years both educators and administrators at the college and university level have become increasingly optimistic in terms of working to learn more about nontraditional adult learner student needs both in the distance education and face-to-face classroom learning environments (Carlan, 2001). With many similar goals which closely align to those of their more traditional counterparts, nontraditional adult learners' needs, regardless of their learning environments, might be more alike than originally thought. It is important that both educators and administrators work to stay ever-vigilant and attentive to the specific needs of these ever-growing student populations if true success is to be attained. Specifically, nontraditional adult students in the distance education setting might be more similar than first thought in terms of in academic, social, and environmental needs compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learners who have filled college campuses for decades (Carlan, 2001). Without further research in this area though, college leaders, educators, and administrators will continue to fuel speculations on the nontraditional adult learners' needs and also express doubts

in terms of their institutions abilities to meet the needs of these nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education settings (Campbell, 1984).

In spite of the many challenges faced by both nontraditional adult students as well as educators and administrators in the higher education setting, the overall picture for nontraditional adult learner success is not bleak (Hardin, 2008). Adult students are often described by educators and administrators as more eager, motivated, and committed than traditional students in the classroom setting (Hardin, 2008). Further, educators are often more enthusiastic about the instruction opportunities for these students primarily because of their unique abilities as well as the deeper richness that these students often bring to both the face-to-face and distance education classrooms (Wayne State University, 2000).

Additionally, nontraditional adult learners appear to be engaging in a wide variety of activities to continue their educations such as self-directed learning activities which focus on specific areas of study as well as attendance at industry/field specific lectures, training, conferences, workshops, and more (Malinovski et al., 2015). Rapidly developing distance education courses and programs are also being viewed as a way in which nontraditional adult learners are working to fulfill previously unmet educational goals. The U.S. Department of Education has even suggested that distance education is changing the fundamental delivery constraints of the higher education system as we know it (Carnevale, 2000). However, research notes a primary issue in distance education learning for nontraditional adult students. The design and usage of newer, more modern day technologies have yet to be fully explored in terms of nontraditional adult student learning; this definitely leaves one to question if the diverse academic, social, and environmental needs of this specific student population are actually being met or even considered (Hardin, 2008).

While much research exists in terms of younger learners and even traditional college students, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) reminded researchers that adult learner student populations have distinctly different learning needs and motivations. For instance, colleges and universities are attracting an increasing proportion of nontraditional adult learners from disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups, many of whom are not in possession of the traditional academic entry requirements needed for college level course work (Watters, 2003). This serves to remind educators and administrators that regardless of the nontraditional adult students' choice of learning environment, the diverse needs of individual nontraditional adult learners must be both considered and addressed (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Rossman, 2000).

Theoretical Frameworks

To properly examine the needs of nontraditional adult learners, previous research on adult learning theories and concepts must first be reviewed. In recent decades, numerous theoretical approaches to learning in the nontraditional adult student populations have served as useful lenses for research in regards to this student population (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Imel, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Such theoretical frameworks work to better aid researchers in exploring practices and applications across a variety of differing contexts, specifically with adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education college classrooms.

As terminology related to adult education shifts and changes throughout the years, with such also comes the evolution, rebirth or even possible demise of other educational perspectives and practices (Malinovski et al., 2015). The term "continuing education" is often used in the literature as an encompassing term for all formal and informal learning activities by which adult learners work to increase their knowledge, attitudes, and/or competencies on a subject (Jarvis, 1995; Smith, 2005). Other common terminology such as "lifelong learning" focuses on a shift

from education to learning and is often generalized to all aspects of a learner's life including social dimensions, environmental factors, society, and even culture (Field, 2006; Tight, 2002). Through such concepts and theories, a respect for the uniqueness of adult learners, learning-centered approaches, and even relationship building techniques between educators/teachers/facilitators and adult learners have been uncovered (Brookfield, 1990; Knowles, 1980; Smith, 1982).

Arguably, the term "andragogy" is possibly one of the most well-known theoretical approaches in regards to adult education (Knowles, 1980). Malcolm Knowles is credited with bringing this term to the attentions of North American adult educators during the 1960s and 1970s (Merriam, 2001). Further, andragogy is one of the most used and discussed frameworks in adult education and has even been described as the art and science of guiding adults through the learning process (Knowles and Associates, 1984). According to this theoretical framework, nontraditional adult learners are said to prefer self-directed learning strategies, enter into the classroom/learning setting with a vast amount of life experiences which should always be taken into consideration when planning classroom learning encounters, often exhibit a readiness to learn which is generally based on a specific need to know specific information or how to do/accomplish something, exhibit an orientation to learning which is more often task or problem-centered versus subject-centered, and also a relatively high degree of internal motivation to learn (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Additionally, Knowles and associates (1984) described the andragological process as a framework which is focused on establishing a suitable physical and psychological learning climate consisting of mutual respect (both between the adult learner and educators as well as peer learners), collaborativeness, supportiveness, openness, and engagement, all while also working to involve the adult learner in a mutual educational planning process.

Knowles (1984) wrote extensively on the topic of how adults learn and often used the andralogical framework to describe the art and science of helping adult students to learn. Knowles (1984) felt that adult learners do not learn in the same way that children do and thus, adult learners require different means of instruction. He stressed the notion that adult learners are more self-directed and will take personal responsibility for decisions, unlike child learners. Knowles (1984) believed that adult learners' desire to understand why they should learn certain material and even learn best when they can utilize the information they have learned immediately in either their personal or professional lives. Knowles (1984) felt that learning strategies such as role playing in the classroom, simulations, self-evaluation exercises, and even case studies for review could be quite useful when used as learning aids for adult students. He later added motivation as a fifth assumption to the andragological model as he began to examine how adult learners better respond to internal versus external motivators in terms of learning.

Knowles (1984) felt that adult learners not only recognize but appreciate good teaching and that they desire educators who take on the role of facilitator rather than lecturer or grader. Knowles (1984) felt that by decreasing educational barriers for nontraditional adult learners, institutions would be working to create new roles for faculty members which focus more on managing and facilitating student learning rather than just lecturing in the classroom environment (Hardin, 2008).

While Knowles (1984) drew quite the attentions of scholars to the variety of differences in adult learning with his theory of andragogy, the framework of andragogy has still been widely debated by scholars who note situational variables which could work to influence the degree to which adults exhibit these characteristics. Such debates have prompted a great amount of discussion on the topic yet andragogy is still one of the most enduring and widely cited and

accepted theories in the field of adult education today (Knowles, 1970; Merriam, 2001). However, it is believed that additional research is needed to fully examine the actual needs, strategies, and approaches which specifically support nontraditional adult learners even today.

Quite similarly, another well-known theory in the area of adult education is referred to as "experiential learning" (Kolb, 1984). This theory emphasizes the need to approach adult learners differently than child learners primarily because of the central role that adult life experiences play in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Because adult experiences are so much more vast than that of younger student learners, these experiences must be taken into consideration when working with nontraditional adult learners in the higher education environment. Such experiences can impact nontraditional adult learners' academic, social, and environmental needs in both the face-to-face and distance education setting, especially in terms of their own learning.

And while the theory of experiential learning can be applicable to both face-to-face and distance education students, the theory of transactional distance is a bit more limited. However, there appears to be a need to mention this theory due to its importance in the distance education setting. Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distances suggests that in the hands of progressive educators, distance educational technologies such as teleconferencing, screencasting, and more allows the educator more opportunity to not only reduce physical and psychological distance in this educational setting, but also works to increase the autonomy of the student as a whole. Other research also notes that such distance educational technologies are being viewed as a new dimension of interaction between student/teacher and student/student, allowing for communications that were formerly unavailable in the distance education setting (Gill, Parker, & Richardson, 2005; Taylor, 2009; Wang & Chen, 2007). The theory of transactional distance

could be another conceptual theory which can be used for further examination of nontraditional adult learners' academic, social, and environmental needs.

Another adult learning theory which could relate to the actual academic, social, and environmental needs in nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education settings is self-directed learning theory. This theory, which is a key assumption in Knowles' (1984) andragogy, has been much discussed in adult learning literature. Candy (1991) suggested that self-directed learning educational goals in formal higher education could be best supported by employing teaching methods and assignments designed to increase learner control in the classroom/course learning process. Further, additional self-directed learning theories suggest that learning in nontraditional adult students can be situational in nature and may even be exhibited at different levels among nontraditional adult learners as they encounter differing learning environments and situations (Grow, 1991).

Transformative learning has also become one of the most prominent and highly debated theories in adult learning research (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Mezirow (2000) felt that transformative learning involves fundamental transformation of the nontraditional adult learners' core frames of reference, which are often evoked by situations which challenge the learners' former ways of thinking, prompting reflection on previously held opinions and assumptions. Some researchers have suggested that educators can help to stimulate transformative learning in the face-to-face and distance education classrooms by employing instructional methods which foster critical thinking and reflection (Cranton, 1994).

Trends in Distance Education

During the last decade, recent technological changes have reshaped the way most educators, administrators, and students view their educations. Many feel that these technological

modernizations in the area of higher education were born out of necessity as many nontraditional adult learners desire to use college educations as a way to advance in their careers, move into new careers, satisfy new job/company/position requirements, and/or acquire new skills and knowledge to expand on their already vast array of experiences and practices (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Recent technological developments in the area of higher education have helped to introduce distance education courses and programs which are working to better meet the flexibility needs of an ever-growing nontraditional adult learner student population. Distance education, which is often broadly defined as the physical separation of an educator and his/her students who primarily interact through mediated technologies while under the auspices of a higher education institution, is becoming an increasingly accepted and commonly utilized means for college and universities to provide broader educational access to current and potential student populations, while also working to achieve quality in more cost-efficient programs (Eastmond, 1998). Over the past few decades, numerous virtual college-degree granting higher education institutions have emerged, offering college courses and programs to primarily nontraditional adult learners while working to provide vital administrative and academic supports, often without physical brick-and-mortar campuses (Eastmond, 1998).

According to recent study results by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 56 percent of all higher-education degree-granting institutions are offering distance educational courses and/or programs (Waits & Lewis, 2003). In 2003 alone, 34 percent of higher education institutions offered completely online degree completion programs (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Since this time, this number has drastically increased as more current data indicates that over 21 million students are now enrolled in distance education courses in either the college or university setting (NCES, 2014). Further, according to Moore and Kearsley (1996), most

distance education students meet the established criteria for nontraditional adult students in the higher education setting. Most recently, online and for-profit institutions have been a primary beneficiary for this increasing trend in distance education enrollment for adult learners (Gast, 2013).

Additionally, a NCES report (2008) revealed that at least two-thirds of two and four-year Title IV degree-granting institutions offered some form of online courses, whether fully online, blended/hybrid courses, or courses offered in other distance education formats for college credit (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). This report indicated that during this timeframe, online courses were offered by 61 percent of all higher education institutions (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Additionally, 35 percent of all higher education institutions offered blended/hybrid courses while other distance educational formats were offered at 26 percent of all such institutions (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Thirty-two percent (32%) of all two and four-year higher education institutions reportedly offered totally online college-level degree or certificate programs through distance educational means (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

Some believe that the recent technological advancements in distance education have not only added to this growth trend but also introduced the ability to reduce feelings of distance, both physical and psychological, in distance courses and programs (Garrison, 2011; Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Such technological advancements include learning opportunities through social networking, collaboration tools, the ability to see course participants/instructors and course resources, videoconferencing, online/offline learning, live chat features, screencasting, and much more (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010). With nearly two-thirds of higher education institutions reporting some level of interest in working to provide access to college for nontraditional adult students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend brick-and-mortar university

offered courses, one can see why working to better serve this student population is becoming a more highly discussed topic in the world of academia (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

After examining current factors most associated with nontraditional adult student growth trends in the distance education setting, research shows that a vital factor affecting the nontraditional adult learners' decision to enroll in distance education course and/or programs is the ability to be more flexible in their schedules. Over the past decade, distance education courses and curricula have emerged as the latest technological advancement in higher education through which institutions can deliver college credited and non-credited coursework, utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Bouhnik & Carmi, 2012; Bower & Hardy, 2004). Distance educational learning environments allow for tremendous convenience and flexibility in terms of allowing busy nontraditional adult students the ability to engage in their educations while coping with their extremely limited resources in terms of finances, energy, and time (Malinovski et al., 2015). Further, distance education courses allow nontraditional adult students who are employed and have families and/or other personal or professional responsibilities the means to update their knowledge and skills related to their careers by saving them travel costs and just allowing them more flexibility of schedule (Park & Choi, 2009). Re-entry nontraditional adult learners often possess multiple personal and professional life roles which generally increase the likelihood that these students will seek certificate and/or degree programs which allow them more flexible schedules in terms of time and location for both coursework completion and access to academic support services (Ross-Gordon, 2011). It appears that strict schedules, specific meeting times, physical locations, standardized testing, rigid approaches to measurements of learning, limited usage of learning and assistive technologies, large group formatting, and instructional techniques often geared to most face-to-

face formal programs can often present significant issues for many nontraditional adult learners (Gadbow & Du Bois, 1998).

Further research on distance education enrollments indicate an overall positive student response and desire for added courses in the realm of distance learning at colleges and/or universities (Eastmond, 1998). Perhaps this is why the popularity of distance education courses and programs are forcing colleges and universities to rethink how they approach more traditionally offered courses and programs (Gadbow, 2002). And although most institutional efforts at college and university distance education programs tend to be more focused on course design and faculty training, research indicates a clear need for further examination of nontraditional adult learners' academic, social, environmental, and administrative support needs if colleges and universities want to continue to increase or even sustain successful student retention and graduation rates at their institutions (Eastmond, 1998).

Like any concept used to educate the masses, distance education has presented its challenges for nontraditional adult learners, educators, providers, and administrators alike. Over the years, distance education providers have been faced with the challenges of moving their adult student populations, administrators, educators, and courses as a whole from the previous traditional low-technology delivery means of print, telephone, and mail to more modern means of distance education (Eastmond, 1998). Further, more modern technologies used in what academia now recognizes as distance education are at times less familiar for many nontraditional adult students (Eastmond, 1998). Such newer technologies and platforms often require some computer skills and can even challenge educators to reexamine their classroom instructional approaches (Eastmond, 1998). Distance education often requires more self-directed, active

learning in which the student must take responsibility for his/her learning and accept new educational experiences as opportunities for growth (Cook, 1995).

While there are numerous similarities between online and face-to-face learning, there are also unique challenges in regards to online learning with research noting this to be especially true in regards to the nontraditional adult learner student population (Park & Choi, 2009). More often than not, distance education courses and programs are populated with nontraditional adult learners who have competing demands on their time, as well as financial and professional responsibilities (Herbert, 2006). The literature also notes that such demands can result in higher attrition rates of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting compared to those students taught in the more traditional face-to-face setting (Rovai, 2003; Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005).

Additionally, learning for nontraditional adult students enrolled in distance education courses can depend on a multitude of factors such as the technologies employed, techniques used, and more. Merriam and Caffarella (2012) noted that nontraditional adult learners tend to be more self-directed and use life experiences to trigger and aid in learning. These researchers also suggested that for nontraditional adult learners, reflection and action are integral elements to the learning process, while other researchers further suggest that successful learning in nontraditional adult learner students can be attributed to collaborative tendencies, interactivity, application, democracy, constructivism, and even a sense of community in the classroom (Eastmond, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 2012).

Learning orientation might also be a factor when examining to what extent nontraditional adult students find certain aspects of instructional techniques important, as they relate to the learning process (Eastmond, 1998). For instance, in a research study conducted by Eastmond

(1995), nontraditional adult students who viewed learning as a means of mastering an external body of knowledge often found distance education courses less important than those students whose goal in the learning process was to construct personal meaning through interactions with the online course content as well as with their peers. Additionally, Burge (2008) found that it was of vital importance for nontraditional adult students to develop strategies for managing peer interactions as well as meta-context. To what extend might require a bit more research though.

No matter how nontraditional adult students learn in the classroom setting, educators must work to better recognize how different aspects of the student's academic, social, and environmental needs influence different characteristics of adult learning. The more educators and administrators understand in terms of nontraditional adult learners' academic, social, and environmental needs, the better they can begin to understand how to best meet these needs in both the face-to-face and distance education setting.

Student Retention in Nontraditional Adult Students

While distance education courses and programs at higher education institutions have experienced a great deal of growth over the years, one alarming aspect relating to this growth in nontraditional adult student populations could be seen as the increasing number of drop-outs from this student population at colleges and universities (Park & Choi, 2009). Further, while the National Center for Education Statistics (1996) estimates that over at least 60 percent of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities should be categorized as nontraditional, research indicates that these nontraditional students who are entering or actively enrolled in higher education institutions are less likely than traditional students to remain enrolled and actually complete their college degrees. In fact, Hardin (1998) felt that these nontraditional adult students

are more likely than their traditional counterparts to drop-out of their postsecondary educations within the first year of enrollment.

Perhaps that is why academic persistence in nontraditional adult learners has been described as a complex phenomenon (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Current research in the area of student retention and student persistence in the higher education setting has generated numerous theories and theoretical models/frameworks to better explain the interrelationship of variables affecting nontraditional adult students' motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). While a significant amount of current research focuses on the expectancy-value theory of motivation, generally stressing the individual's self-efficacy, interest and task values, other researchers suggest different means of examining student persistence and retention in this specific student population (Meister, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In order to best understand nontraditional adult learner needs, one must keep in mind the role student persistence and retention levels play in this equation.

Meister (2002) notes that 70 percent of nontraditional adult students enrolled in online degree programs do not complete their education. Further, a research study conducted by the Corporate University Xchange (2000) explained that one of the most difficult challenges in terms of distance education courses and programs is to actually retain students. Research indicates that numerous studies have shown that there is a much higher percentage of nontraditional adult students in the distance education setting who choose to drop-out of their courses and/or programs compared to more traditional students in the face-to-face setting (Hilz, 1997; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Many external factors such as environmental support for the student, financial issues, and time/schedule constraints have been suggested as immense barriers to nontraditional adult learner participation in both the face-to-face and distance education learning settings

(Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Willging and Johnson (2004) believed that external factors such as family issues, lack of environmental support, new employment situations, and the overall workload on the student are vital factors affecting the nontraditional adult students' decision to stay enrolled in or drop-out of their coursework. Further, Greer, Hudson, and Paugh (1998) stressed the need of close family and/or peer support systems in order for these learners to be successful in the higher education setting. Rovai (2003) emphasized the effect of non-school related factors which often conflict with a nontraditional adult students' coursework and the student's decision to drop-out.

Tinto (2006) noted that when the issue of student retention first began to be discussed in the area of higher education some almost 50 years ago, it was generally viewed through the lens of psychology. Student retention rates were viewed as the clear reflection of individual attributes, personality traits, skill, and motivational levels (Tinto, 2006). During this timeframe, it was believed that students who drop-out of their postsecondary educational endeavors were less able, determined, motivated, and less willing than those students who progressed through their educations to ultimately degree completion (Tinto, 2006). Basically speaking, students failed, not higher education institutions. Tinto (2006) suggested that this is what can now be referred to as blaming the victim.

However, this limited view of student retention began to shift during the 1970s as a much broader understanding of how educators and administrators view the relationship between an individual, society, and higher education institutions began to change (Tinto, 2006). Research indicated that more focus was placed at this time on the role of the student's environment, particularly that of the higher educational institution in which they were enrolled, in the student's decision to remain as an actively enrolled, participating student or their decision to drop-out of

higher education as a whole (Tinto, 2006). It is believed that this early work in the area of student retention helped to escort in an era of what is now termed "the age of involvement" (Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984).

The research of Astin (1975) as well as Pascarella, Lorang, and Terenzini (1981) has been noted as influential in reinforcing the important link between student contact or student involvement and student retention. Though this research and much more in the area of student involvement, or student engagement as it is now more commonly known, coincides a great deal with student retention rates, it was ultimately determined that student involvement/engagement matters even more so during the first year of a student's enrollment at their chosen college or university (Tinto, 2001; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Perhaps this lack of student engagement is a primary reason why most nontraditional adult students cycle in and out of colleges and universities, often attending multiple higher education institutions in their educational lifespans with estimates of upwards of 60 percent of all nontraditional adult students attending more than one college and/or university during their academic careers (Adelman, 1999).

Because of the increasing number of nontraditional adult student drop-outs in the collegiate setting, several theories and theoretical frameworks have been proposed to better explain the "why" behind these numbers. For example, Tinto's (1993) student integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model have been a focal point for many research studies examining nontraditional adult learner student drop-out rates. Tinto's (1993) student retention research suggests that attrition is a direct result of the social and academic interactions between a nontraditional adult student and his/her educational environment. Tinto (1993) also noted that social and academic integration helps to produce a stronger learner commitment to

their coursework, programs, and institutions and even works to increase students' persistence levels.

Further, Bean and Metzner (1985) created a conceptual model for nontraditional adult learner drop-outs which focuses on the student's academic performance, psychological factors, backgrounds, and even environmental elements. By using this model, the researchers determined that the primary difference between attrition in traditional versus nontraditional students could be that nontraditional students are more affected by external environmental factors compared to the more traditional students. It is important to note though with Bean and Metzner's model, nontraditional adult learners in the distance educational setting are not examined. Such research findings do appear to suggest that the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult student in both the face-to-face and distance education student populations might require more research for a better overall understanding.

However, in regards to this lack of research in the area of student retention and persistence, Kember (1989) proposed a longitudinal process model for nontraditional student drop-outs in the distance education setting. In this model, social and academic integration on nontraditional adult learners are often examined with intervening variables between the student's characteristics/backgrounds and persistence, changes over time, and the student's decision to drop-out or stay active in more lengthy courses (Kember, 1989). Further, Kember, Lai, Murphy. Siaw, and Yuen (1994) performed tests on this model in a variety of educational institutions and courses; research findings emphasized the importance of social and academic integration in regards to nontraditional adult student progress, especially in the distance education setting.

Further, Rovai (2003) constructed a persistence model to better explain factors affecting a nontraditional adult learner's ultimate decision to drop-out of distance education courses and

programs. This persistence model, created by utilizing Tinto's (1993) student integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model, includes two before admission variables (student characteristics and student skill levels before admission) as well as two after admission variables (external and internal factors); external factors would include finances, number of employed hours, external support from friends/family/peers, and more while internal factors included elements such as academic and social integration, self-esteem levels, interpersonal relationships, study habits, academic advising, class participation, and more (Rovai, 2003).

Packham, Jones, Miller, and Thomas (2004) further expanded on Rovai's (2003) persistence model by focusing on identifying factors which affected nontraditional adult learner drop-out rates in the distance education setting. While these researchers noted the significance of the four factors from Rovai's (2003) model as supported through their research, they also suggested a revision of the structure of the persistence model, while ultimately suggesting the elimination of learner skills from the model as little to no empirical support has been given from previous research studies.

In regards to external factors and student persistence, Tinto (1997) suggested that researchers should come to better appreciate the impact of external environmental factors on students' lives while also keeping in mind the importance of involvement in the classroom setting due to its relation to student retention. Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994) feel that such importance is vital as, for many nontraditional students, the classroom is the one and perhaps the only place where such students can meet each other as well as faculty members; if there is no involvement in this setting, it is extremely unlikely to occur anywhere else. Student retention should be everyone's business and focus, in particularly that of the faculty members (Tinto, 2006). Faculty involvement in a college and/or university's student retention efforts is often

vital to the overall success in this area. But even with this being said, faculty involvement is often less than it should be as most educators and higher education institutions are not yet equipped to translate what is known through research on student retention to applicable forms of action in regards to gains in student persistence and graduation rates in the collegiate setting (Tinto, 2006).

While most research in the area of student persistence focuses on student retention and outcomes in traditional learners, some researchers argue that persistence is instead strongly related to the student's commitment to the institution. For instance, Bean (1990) and Tinto (1993) argued that student persistence may be strongly related to that student's commitment to the college or university they are attending. These researchers believed that student commitment is primarily influenced by the student's social integration into the campus community (Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1993). One major limitation here though is the fact that most of this research is focused on persistence in traditional students, excluding nontraditional adult learners (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Another important factor which is often noted in research related to student persistence in nontraditional adult learners is the attendance patterns for this student population (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). Nontraditional adult students generally cycle in and out of college, frequently withdrawing and even dropping-out for extended periods of time, before eventually re-enrolling in a college or university (Kerka, 1998). The U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study on drop-out rates found that of all first year student enrollments, 30 percent left prior to beginning their second year of college (Horn & Carroll, 1998). However, it was determined that many of these students did not drop-out permanently as almost half of these students who dropped-out during their first year of college re-enrolled within five years (Horn & Carroll,

1998). Research indicated that nontraditional adult students who engaged in these attendance patterns were typically considered to be at greater risk of never finishing their college degrees (Kerka, 1998).

Further, unfortunately there also appeared to be an overall tendency for educators and administrators to attribute any lack of persistence from the nontraditional adult student's part to the student's lack of overall motivation and/or interest in the higher education setting and/or their coursework as a whole. Rather than working to better understand the vital role which educators and administrators play in supporting nontraditional adult learners, many institutions were quick to overlook such factors and instead attribute this lack of persistence in nontraditional adult learners to other factors and evens character flaws. Perhaps that is why it is believed that early intervention as well as more research is needed if nontraditional adult students are to persist at the college and/or university level.

Additionally, it has been suggested that some educators and administrators feel that higher drop-out rates in the distance education setting are a complete failure in higher education institutions while others stress careful consideration when formulizing such conclusions as many nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance educational settings are in possession of unique characteristics and situations which many increase such drop-out rates (Park & Choi, 2009). For instance, Diaz (2002) feels that uncontrollable elements often influence nontraditional adult student drop-out decisions and that increases in drop-out rates are not necessarily indicative of academic non-success. Unfortunately though, there appears to still be a clear gap between the research and practice here. With the onset of this realization in combination with the continued challenges of attempting to better understand and meet nontraditional adult learner students' needs, many researchers would agree that this has led to an

increased focus on "what works." While it is one thing to better understand why nontraditional adult students drop-out of the higher education environment, it is quite another to know what colleges and universities can do to help students stay actively enrolled and succeed in their educational journeys (Tinto, 2006). After all, dropping out is not the mirror image of staying enrolled (Tinto, 2006). A better understanding of why nontraditional adult students drop-out does not also explain why they choose to stay enrolled (Tinto, 2006). And of even more importance, this does not explain to colleges and universities what they can do to assist students in staying enrolled and being successful with their educational goals.

Gadbow (2002) noted that if more available flexible structures and ranges of options were in place for both face-to-face and distance education courses and programs at higher education institutions, it might be possible for nontraditional adult student needs to be more reasonably met and managed. Further, Gadbow (2002) felt that gaining better understanding in the area of nontraditional adult learner needs in both the face-to-face and distance education setting would allow for drastic increases in college and program completion rates, with drop-out rates being drastically reduced. Moreover, if such courses and programs were also able to better prepare nontraditional adult learners with better resources and abilities as self-directed, competent learners, their societal and economic impacts could be increasingly more positive as well (Gadbow, 2002). And as the United States is working to better prepare the workforce and labor markets for the future, addressing individual learners' needs and differences can be seen as even more critical in today's modern world (Gadbow, 2002).

It is important to note that in spite of the challenges nontraditional adult learners face in the higher education setting, the future outlook for this ever-growing student population is anything but bleak (Hardin, 2008). As previously mentioned, literature often highlights the fact

that nontraditional adult students offer many benefits in the classroom learning environment that more traditional students do not possess. Often, nontraditional adult students are able to enhance the learning experience due in part to the experiences they bring to the classroom from their personal and professional lives. Further, many educators are quick to note that nontraditional adult learners are more eager, motivated, and committed to learning compared to traditional students (Hardin, 2008). As a whole, educators appear to be enthusiastic about teaching nontraditional adult student populations, primarily because they often bring richness to the classroom learning atmosphere through their diverse backgrounds and experiences (Wayne State University, 2000).

Most nontraditional adult students enroll in higher education institutions truly planning to obtain there degree there (Hardin, 2008). However, it is often institutional barriers such as policies, procedures, and an overall lack of understanding of both face-to-face and distance education students' needs which hinders nontraditional adult students from meeting personal education goals (Hardin, 2008). These barriers are often present without institutions even realizing they exist and can occur from any time a nontraditional adult student enrolls in college until the moment that student considers dropping-out. Madfes (1989) expounded on this by stating that when nontraditional adult students are faced with college and/or university-imposed barriers, these students are significantly less tolerant than their more traditional student counterparts and often choose to drop-out of their institutions versus actually addressing the barrier, adding increasingly more stress to their already stressful lives. Further, Nordstrom (1997) as well as Hammer, Grigsby, and Woods (1998) suggested that nontraditional adult students are more focused on completing the academic requirements of their colleges or universities in the least amount of time possible and are primarily concerned with the

institution's proximity to their home/work, the availability of night, weekend, and/or online courses offerings, the availability of faculty members "after hours," quality day care accommodations, easily available academic advisors, and overall quality instruction in the courses in which they are enrolled. Learning environments such as these offer tremendous convenience and flexibility, allowing nontraditional adult students to attend higher education institutions which better work for them instead of against them.

Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) suggested that colleges and universities take a more proactive approach to better understanding the needs of nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education setting. At present, a limited number of college and university campuses have created specific divisions and offices devoted entirely to working with nontraditional adult students (Hardin, 2008). These college and university offices focus on helping nontraditional adult students become more educated and better informed on nontraditional scholarship programs, the registration process, academic advising and counseling services, field and career options, student health services, student parking, the financial aid process, student housing, networking with peers/colleagues, commuting issues, and even have staff available to answer questions regarding courses, programs, and/or instructors (Hardin, 2008). And with the more heightened focus on the part of higher education institutions and states alike on increasing student persistence and graduation rates, this increased focus might not have come at a better time (Tinto, 2006). In fact, it seems that more and more businesses and consulting firms are being created with the intentions of claiming some unique capacity of increasing student persistence, retention, and graduation rates. It is not unreasonable to assume that student retention rates have become a "big business" for both researchers and entrepreneurs (Tinto, 2006). Still though, it appears that significant gains in student retention and graduation

rates have been difficult to come by. While some colleges and universities have been able to increase these rates, the majority appear to have not (Tinto, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the national rate of student persistence and graduation rates have shown disappointing changes over the past two decades (NCES, 2005a). The real issue here is that despite numerous years of work and research in the areas of student persistence, retention, graduation rates, and nontraditional adult student needs, there is still a great deal which is unknown and has yet to be fully explored (Tinto, 2006). While researchers have noted ways in which nontraditional adult learners persist and how this may differ from their more traditional counterparts, there still appears to be a lack of research in terms of the nontraditional adult students' learning environment and how nontraditional adult learner needs differ depending on the environment in which the student chooses to learn (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Naretto, 1995). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to question what else educators and administrators need to do to further improve the overall effectiveness of learning and collegiate approaches, especially in terms of better understanding the nontraditional adult students' academic, social, and environmental need differences (Tinto, 2006).

Nontraditional Adult Learner Needs

Academic Needs

Colleges and universities as a whole are searching for more effective ways to increase student retention, persistence, and graduation rates. However, perhaps the issue which must be first examined is the actual academic, social, and environmental needs of this nontraditional adult student population. Gast (2013) felt that higher education institutions which seek to increase in these areas must evaluate the effectiveness of the services they currently offer for meeting the various needs of nontraditional adult students. After all, nontraditional adult

learners lead very busy lives and take on a variety of roles in both their personal and professional situations. Adult learners are not always available during normal business hours to ask questions or discuss various elements of their educations with administrators and/or faculty members (Gast, 2013). That is why there must be further research into the area of academic and environmental needs for nontraditional adult students so as to better tailor these services to best accommodate the unique and diverse needs of nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education settings. Doing so will enable higher education institutions to more adequately support and retain nontraditional adult students throughout the collegiate process all the way to graduation (Gast, 2013).

Further, research indicates that as colleges and universities attract an increasing nontraditional adult student population, many of these adult learners are not in possession of the traditional college or university entry requirements often held by their more traditional counterparts (Watters, 2003). Unfortunately, because many nontraditional adult learners are just not academically prepared for higher education learning situations and feel overwhelmed academically when they begin their coursework, many choose to instead drop-out altogether (Hardin, 1997). While there appears to be numerous reasons for these academic deficiencies, the most common noted in current research is that these nontraditional adults simply made overall past poor decision which adversely affected their academic futures, leaving these students underprepared as a whole (Hardin, 2008). Generally, it appears that these underprepared students chose poorly due to one of two reasons. Either they selected coursework in their secondary educations which was not viewed as college preparatory curriculum thus leaving the student ill-prepared for the many academic demands of the college or university environment or they chose to drop-out of their secondary education altogether (Hardin, 2008). Although many

of these students did eventually satisfy the requirements needed to obtain their general educational development diploma (GED), such could have provided the student with a false sense of security about their ability to be prepared for the collegiate environment (Hardin, 1997). Generally speaking, GED exams are geared to measure an individual's ability to complete the most basic portions of a secondary education; they are not geared towards measuring an individual's ability to be successful at the collegiate level (Hardin, 2008).

Hardin (2008) also noted that some nontraditional adult students experience academic difficulties in their college or university coursework because many have taken an extended time away from an actual academic environment. Hardin's (2008) research found that students who have not used academic skills for several years since the completion of their secondary educations often find they need additional practice, guidance, and support when returning to the educational setting. Further, some nontraditional adult students experience academic issues because they have physical limitations, learning disabilities (whether diagnosed or not), and/or even speak a different primary language than that in which the course is taught, thus making both face-to-face and distance education classroom activities quite challenging (Hardin, 1997). Because of these barriers and many more yet to be fully discussed, it has been suggested in the research that careful academic advisement is vital for nontraditional adult learners in the higher education setting (Hardin, 2008). Further, these academic advisors should be knowledgeable about adult learners and the challenges such learners often face, while also working to help these students to create realistic and attainable long-term educational goals (Hardin, 2008). With this in mind, the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) noted that the connection between nontraditional adult student academic goals and the field/career path they have chosen is not a one-time occurring event which should only be conducted at the beginning or end of that

student's academic career. Rather, academic advisors should constantly and continually work with nontraditional adult students to discuss, review, and revise what educational goals the students would like to achieve, how they are working to make these achievements, and how their higher education institution can better aid these students in achieving their goals (Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). Because of this, colleges and universities must choose knowledgeable, personable, and well-trained academic advisors who are in-touch with the special challenges, issues, and needs of the nontraditional adult student (Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000).

At present, much time and research has been devoted to the examination of academic performance of nontraditional adult students and as a result, numerous theories and potential explanations have been created essentially attributing nontraditional adult student performance to learning styles, background characteristics, and much more. Moreover, colleges and universities seem to be paying increasingly more attention to the differences in academic needs of nontraditional adult learners, even though their appears to be limited research in terms of the different needs of these learners in the face-to-face setting as compared to the distance education setting. Yet research notes that over 50 percent of nontraditional adult students enrolled in colleges and/or universities report that they have to "make do" with barely adequate academic resources at best; in some cases, these students even found some of the academic resources unsuitable as a whole (Watters, 2003). Educators and administrators must recognize that almost every institutional policy, practice, decision, and even design can affect the way nontraditional adult students manage their limited academic time and energies, including the time and energy they specifically make available to complete their academic pursuits (Astin, 1999).

As most nontraditional adult students choose to drop-out in their first semester enrolled in the college or university setting, Rendon (1995) suggested that higher education institutions focus primarily on two vital phases which affect this decision: the successful transition to the college environment as well as acquiring successful academic and social connections in this environment. As noted by Rendon (1995), Ely (1997), and Tyler (1993), course design, curriculum choices, and overall classroom structure can provide key elements to the promotion of nontraditional adult student success in the classroom environment while also helping these students to make a more seamless transition to the collegiate setting. Koehler and Burke (1996) suggest furthered integration of particular curricular aspects which more fully introduce nontraditional adult learners to the collegiate setting before they are fully immersed in the system as a whole to improve in this area. Transition classes are often offered to nontraditional adult students in the initial term of their coursework as a way of introducing the student to the collegiate setting. These courses are often non-graded, free and provide a holistic, integrated curriculum and class structure which has a primary focus on active learning strategies and skill building in the area of academic, emotional, and social skills, all of which are required in the collegiate environment (Koehler & Burke, 1996). Koehler and Burke (1996) also go on to note that three main principles generally guide methodologies employed in transition classes. First, students will be self-directed learners and responsible for their own learning. Second, establishing high expectations for these students helps them to become better acclimated to the collegiate environment. And lastly, being a part of the transition course allows the nontraditional adult learner to work in a classroom environment which is based on a sense of community (Koehler & Burke, 1996). These researchers believe that transition classes which are designed for "underprepared, nontraditional, first generation college attenders is an effective way to level

the playing field for first-generation college attenders" (Koehler & Burke, 1996, p. 4). However, some educators, administrators, and researchers are left with questions such as if these courses might be deterrents for nontraditional adult students as they do not always fit with the student's demanding schedules and/or whether such courses are not just working to conform these students to simply what is needed/required in the collegiate setting rather than examining their actual needs (Kim, 2002). Both of which, might actually be attributing to higher student drop-out rates in nontraditional adult students.

Working with nontraditional adult learners to help them better understand their specific individual learning styles and differences in terms of academic needs has been suggested throughout the research as the primary responsibility of both higher education administrators and adult educators alike (Gadbow, 2002). By accomplishing this task, successful educators and administrators can then seek effective strategies to better meet the needs of the nontraditional adult student population, regardless of their learning environment. To bring about successful and effective educational encounters, Galbraith (1989) stated that educators must obtain specific skills to create supportive and engaging educational climates while also working to provide challenging instructional and learning interactions and activities. Further, Ellsworth (1992), Brookfield (1992), Imel (1995), and Knowles (1992) have noted in their research that while many nontraditional adult students have expressed throughout the literature positive support for problem-centered instructional approaches which allow the students the opportunity to use their real-work experiences in the face-to-face and/or distance education classroom setting, it still appears that these nontraditional adult learners prefer a more eclectic instructional model consisting of lecture, discussion, and much more. Additionally, Steiner, Stromwall, Brzuzy, and Gerdes (1999) revealed that cooperative strategies in the classroom setting also help in teaching

small group skills, effective communication strategies, and critical thinking skills to nontraditional adult learners. Cooperative learning strategies can have a significant impact on the classroom learning environment by changing the classroom from an environment in which students are passive recipients of information to one in which these students become actively engaged participants in their educations (Chulup & Collins, 2010). By employing such approaches to the learning process, educators and administrators can work to lift the limits of traditional higher education and begin working to better match creative instructional methods and techniques with the specific academic, social and environmental needs of each nontraditional adult learner, whether in the face-to-face classroom or distance education learning environment (Gadbow, 2002).

Beyond the focus of using cooperative strategies to teach specific course content is the even broader goal of building competent, self-directed learners who are self-confident and possess the skills to guide their own learning (Gadbow, 2002). Galbraith and Shedd (1990) have also suggested that challenging tasks and assignments should be developed and employed in the classroom environment so as to provide insight into how newly acquired knowledge can be applied to the nontraditional adult learner's life. In doing so, these researchers believe that educators should work to provide realistic and varied practice opportunities in classroom assignments which aid nontraditional adult learners in applying what has been learned (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990). Knox (1974) also noted that continuous feedback should be provided to the learner regarding how they are progressing with the material. However, Brookfield (1987) and Schon (1999) considered that the most vital component to the educational process in the classroom might be simply developing and organizing educational encounters which allow the nontraditional adult learner and instructor the ability to both act and think in a critical and

reflective manner. The researcher stated that this "involves calling into question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then be ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 1).

In terms of academic needs, Elliot, McGregor, and Gable (1999) investigated the potential relationship between nontraditional adult students' achievement goals, their strategies for studying the course information, and their examination performance. The results of this study found that the association between the learners' achievement goals and their academic attainment was mediated by their efforts, persistence, and organization in their studies. Grant and Dweck's (2003) summarized findings on this topic suggested that nontraditional adult students who employ learning goals are found to engage with the material and the course content in a deeper manner, were increasingly self-regulated with their learning strategies, possessed higher levels of intrinsic motivation, and performed overall better, especially when they were faced with issues, challenges, or setback as a whole. After all, using learning goals to help nontraditional adult students understand how to learn can be one of the most important things an educator ever does (Smith, 1982).

While there is a great deal of research which focuses on student persistence, motivation, and retention in nontraditional adult learners, there still appears to be a large gap in the research in regards to the actual academic needs of face-to-face nontraditional adult learners compared to their distance education enrolled nontraditional adult learner counterparts. Perhaps this is why teaching has been described as a complex art (Astin, 1999). As with all forms of art, educating others, especially nontraditional adult learners, can and will suffer if the "artist" (or educator) focuses solely on technique (Astin, 1999). In order for educators to truly be effective, they must

learn to focus on the actual needs of each individual learner; focusing on these needs may also increase student engagement, persistence, and understanding as a whole (Astin, 1999).

Social Needs

A common component often mentioned in the research is the need to create a positive environmental experience for nontraditional adult students to fully integrate in the higher education environment. In fact, one of the most vital elements to any teaching and/or learning interaction is to build a positive psycho-social and psychological educational climate, especially in the first sessions of the course (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990; Knox, 1974). Such educational climates must be created in ways which are supportive, challenging, friendly, not overly formal, open, and spontaneous for the student without being threatening and/or condescending (Knox, 1974). Vella (2002) also suggested that an effective nontraditional adult learning environment, both in the face-to-face environment as well as the distance education environment, should work to create feelings of safety, relationship building, respect for student learners as decision-makers, positive teamwork climates, be engaging for the learner, all while keeping the student accountable in their educational experiences. Further, other research which supports Vella's (2002) points also goes a bit more in-depth to encourage the educator to work to create an open classroom communication climate (Eble, 1976; Good & Brophy, 1987; Purkey & Novak, 1996). These various characteristics and elements, which are generally referred to as social interaction teaching methods, are instructional strategies which are employed by the educator to facilitate student-centered teamwork experiences in the classroom environment (Chulup & Collins, 2010).

By utilizing the social interaction teaching method, nontraditional adult students are helping each other to create meaning through teamwork and/or group project assignments, group discussions, and overall cooperative learning experiences (Burden & Byrd, 2007). For instance,

while students who are present in face-to-face courses often discuss the course material through classroom dialoguing and more formally designed classroom discussion assignments, distance education students can also discuss the material as well using online discussion forums. And while traditional face-to-face students are often limited by their geographical proximity to each other, today's nontraditional adult students who are enrolled in distance education courses can be involved in online course discussion forums composed of students and educators who are located all around the world (Cook, 1995). The online class discussion forums allow nontraditional adult students the ability to collaborate on the course material, even by just working together on assignments or performing a group task which may have been more difficult if completed individually (Eastmond, 1998).

Research in the area of nontraditional adult learners' social needs in the academic environment show that these nontraditional adult students must work to find the right balance in terms of their growing professional and personal demands present in their own lives (Malinovski et al., 2015). The demands of the academic environment often compete with the nontraditional adult students' often limited resources (Eastmond, 1998; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). Perhaps that is why Haggan (2000) noted that college and university counseling services can play a large role in helping nontraditional adult students negotiate these various dilemmas and roles present in their lives for a more positive academic and social experience.

The more socially integrated the nontraditional adult student is in the college and/or university atmosphere, the more successful that student might be in terms of persistence and retention. A highly involved student is a student who generally allots considerably more energy and time to his/her studies, is more likely to actively participate in student organizations, frequently interacts with faculty members and their peers, and is just more involved with their

educational experience at their higher education institution as a whole (Astin, 1999). However, a typically uninvolved student is one that generally neglects his/her studies, chooses to not be involved with student organizations, and strives for little to no contact with faculty members and/or their peers (Astin, 1999).

Many researchers believe that student social involvement with faculty and their peers can be linked to overall student success in the higher education environment (Astin, 1999; Eastmond, 1998; Yakimovicz & Murphy, 1995). Astin (1999) suggested that the level of student involvement presented by the nontraditional adult learner can often provide the link between various elements of the educational process such as subject matter understanding, utilization of educational resources, and even overall achievement of the course learning outcomes. Astin's (1999) research also noted that frequent social interactions with faculty members and peers in the higher education environment is more strongly related to satisfaction levels with students' educational experiences than any other type of involvement or characteristic in this environment. Through his research, Astin (1999) revealed that nontraditional adult students who frequently interact with faculty members and their peers are more likely than other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their educational and institutional experiences. Because of this, it has been suggested that finding ways to encourage greater student social involvement might be extremely beneficial for most colleges and universities in terms of student satisfaction, retention, persistence, and graduation rates (Astin, 1999).

Perhaps one way of increasing student/faculty social interaction in the distance education environment could be through the use of online discussion forums. Online discussion forums are conversational environments which are generally text-only based and consist of topical "threads" or "posts" (sequences of messages created by students and/or instructors). These online

discussions are generally asynchronous (not conducted in real-time) and often require more interaction with fellow students and/or the instructor, while also allowing the student more time to create his/her message or even pace his/herself to better keep up with the dialogue of the discussion as a whole (Eastmond, 1998).

Eastmond (1998) explained that these online discussion forums can often be more democratic than traditional face-to-face dialogue as asynchronous online discussions allow all students the ability to create and contribute ideas (often in the form of "posts") which are as in-depth or even brief as they choose them to be. More specifically, Eastmond (1998) notes that in his study on this topic, a nontraditional adult student nearing the end of a distance education course expressed a sense of community for the online discussion component to the course by stating, "A lot of [the class members'] closing thoughts were how wonderful it was to use the computer because they were no longer alone. They felt the connection with other students, and they liked being able to talk back and forth and get different perspectives" (Eastmond, 1995, p. 17). Perhaps that is why Yakimovicz and Murphy (1995) suggested that nontraditional adult students who participate in online discussion forums feel that effective communication is a socially constructed behavior as students work to form and discover their own online discussion communication and participation norms.

Other techniques have also been suggested in working to create a more effective social climate in both the face-to-face and distance education classroom environment. For example, Galbraith and Shedd (1990) suggested that instructors start by introducing themselves to the students enrolled in their classes while also taking the time to explain their educational philosophies, the roles they see themselves taking in the students' learning experiences, the expectations they have for what roles the learners should take in the course, the importance of

the subject matter along with how it interconnects to the students' personal/professional goals, and how the course will aid them in their personal/professional endeavors. Additionally, educators should have the students introduce themselves including personal and professional information as well as the reason they chose to enroll in the course (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990). These researchers feel that not only can educators gain valuable information from these experiences, but learners can also connect with other peers who may be enrolled in the course for the same reasons, hold similar goals, expectations, fears, anxieties, and more (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990). Nontraditional adult learners often express feelings of isolation while enrolled in college and/or university courses. Nordstrom (1997) stated that nontraditional adult learners often become easily isolated from their academic communities and that their overall successes in the higher education environment can often depend on the opportunities these students have to interact with peers who possess similar goals, interests, and personal/professional life roles. Helping these nontraditional adult learners socially integrate and interact with faculty members and peers can help these students overcome feelings of isolation in the higher education environment thus allowing them to be generally more successful in their academic pursuits (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Hardin, 2008).

A research study conducted by Wyatt (2011) found that nontraditional adult students were far less likely than more traditional students to become socially engaged in their college and/or university social activities. While they were more likely to engage in the classroom environment through their classroom participation, social dialogues with faculty members, and just being more prepared in terms of the course material, they still appeared to be less socially involved with their institutions as a whole (Wyatt, 2011). Further, Rendon (1994) notes that nontraditional adult learners will not become willingly involved, much less highly involved,

students on their own. Because of this, researchers such as Rendon (1994) and Tinto (1999) feel that colleges and universities must work to construct validating academic and social environments both inside and outside of the face-to-face and distance education course environments. Both researchers suggest that validating communities such as those previously mentioned can be created in the face-to-face and distance education learning environments by replacing competitive learning environments with more personalized attentions for the individual student, working to promote encouraging and positive reinforcements for instructors, promoting active learning in the classroom, working to validate individual student abilities to learn and accept challenges, and by also fostering a positive and culturally sensitive classroom climate (Kim, 2002; Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1999).

However, while there appears to be a great deal of research in terms of nontraditional adult learner social engagements in the higher education settings, nontraditional adult learner student needs have yet to fully be understood or explored, especially when examining the possible unique differences these students may face in terms of their chosen learning environments. With this clear gap in the research in regards to the social needs of nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting as compared to the distance education setting, more research in this area is needed to fully understand and meet the social needs for these very different nontraditional adult learner student populations.

Environmental Needs

While the work of researchers such as Pace (1980), Astin (1993) and Kuh (2003) have done a great deal to operationalize the concepts of academic and social integration in ways which can be both measured and used for higher education institutional assessment and analysis, their research as well as adult education research as a whole does not yet fully examine the

environmental needs of this student population. While research does suggest how environmental elements in a nontraditional adult learner's life can affect his/her educational goals, there is still a great deal more which needs to be explored on this topic. In many cases, these nontraditional adult learners both in the face-to-face and distance education setting are first generation college students in their families (Hardin, 2008). Because of this, family and peer support is believed to be critical to their overall successes in the higher education environment. Hardin (2008) stated that nontraditional adult learners should be encouraged to be more integrated in the academic and social dimensions of their colleges and/or universities. Research further suggests that nontraditional adult learners who are more involved with both the academic and social lives of their higher education institutions are more likely to persistence in their educational goals (National On-Campus Reports, 2002). With this in mind, Hardin (2008) believed that one way to encourage nontraditional adult learners in becoming more academically and socially involved is to include activities for their family members, including their children, which are major environmental factors for these students.

Many nontraditional adult students also benefit from substantial amounts of additional environmental support provided by their family, peers, and higher education institutions. Hazzard (1993) noted that orientation programs which are supported by educators and administrators can work to introduce nontraditional adult students to their colleges and/or universities, which might promote success in this student population. Further, research suggests that support programs which are created specifically for nontraditional adult students are increasingly more likely to attract these students' attention versus those programs which are open to both nontraditional adult students as well as more traditional students (Gast, 2013). As previously noted when discussing the social needs of the nontraditional adult learner, while these

students are less likely to be engaged in college and/or university social activities, it appears that they would be more likely to join a student organization dedicated solely to nontraditional adult students (Gast, 2013).

Still though, it appears that nontraditional adult students face a multitude of environmental issues and barriers to learning for which their more traditional counterparts might not face. For example, nontraditional adult students often encounter opposition in their professional and personal lives which hinder the completion of their academic educational goals; such issues can arise from peers, family members, and significant others who often feel threatened by the students' goals and/or successes (Kerka, 1998). In Benshoff and Lewis' (1992) examination of re-entry students, those who encountered limited social acceptance and an overall lack of support for their status as a student generally experienced this when the student's academic role took time and energy away from his/her other professional and/or personal life roles. Research notes that common environmental reasons for students dropping-out of college can vary depending on gender as well. For example, the most common reason noted in the research as to why males drop-out of colleges and/or universities is because of their lack of support from family and/or peers combined with an overall feeling of 'boredom' with the collegiate experience; such suggests that a lack of environmental support and as well as a lack of social involvement could affect higher education retention rates in males (Astin, 1999). Further, the most common reason noted in the research as to why females drop-out of college is due to marriage, pregnancy, personal/family responsibilities, and/or academic constraints which offer competing objectives in their lives and take both time and energy away from her family roles (Astin, 1999). Kerka (1998) noted that female nontraditional adult students were presented with even more environmental barriers as they are often the ones challenged with educational and

childcare issues which might add to and/or even build on the previously mentioned opposition from family members, peers, and significant others. Overall, parents are at a much higher risk of dropping-out of college than traditional students (Horn et al., 2002).

Still though, while such barriers often increase the likelihood of nontraditional adult students dropping-out of college, they are not always a deterrent for the nontraditional adult students' abilities and motivations to achieve his/her educational goals (Hensley & Kinser, 2001). For instance, Donaldson and Graham (1999) emphasized nontraditional adult learners' abilities to compensate for their lack of general campus involvement by stressing that the nontraditional adult learners' persistence levels is related to many different variables. Such variables can include commitment to their roles as students and the possession of above average study skills as well as the possession of clear, focused educational goals (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Further, these researchers suggested that the presence of strong support systems or reinforcing-agent family, friends, peers, colleagues, and more are vital factors which contribute to adult learner persistence in the higher education setting (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Gibson (1995) noted that with a nontraditional adult learners' often problem-centered approach and various life responsibilities, persistence to graduation, even if these students remain actively enrolled in the collegiate environment, is drastically slower than more traditional students. Further, nontraditional adult students often deal with psychological barriers in the higher education environment. Such barriers can include inadequate coping skills, lack of self-confidence and poor self-image, anxieties about educational experiences based on prior experiences, negative self-talk, and/or even negative expectations about educational outcomes (Kerka, 1989). Further, Donohue and Wong (1997) stipulated that nontraditional adult students are increasingly more likely to be at some form of risk for psychological distress compared to

more traditional students. These researchers also feel that nontraditional adult learner needs are more likely to be overlooked in the traditional university setting (Donohue & Wong, 1997). Additionally, Dziech and Vilter (1992) warned college and university educators and administrators of nontraditional adult students' feelings of inadequacy when returning to the educational environment and how these feelings can affect their persistence levels. When combined with a lack of environmental support, such negative feelings towards their educational pursuits can be detrimental.

A respect for the uniqueness of each nontraditional adult learner, learning-centered approaches, and working to build supportive social relationships between the educator and the learner are concepts which have been suggested for numerous years in adult education literature (Brookfield, 1990; Knowles, 1980; Smith, 1982). And because of the many environmental issues and barriers these nontraditional adult learners often face, one can see why these concepts have been stressed. In working to create effective educational environmental climates, educators must learn the skills needed to better build supportive and actively engaging educational climates as well as how to create challenging teaching and learning interactions in both the face-to-face and distance education learning environments (Galbraith, 1989). In doing this, educators must be cognizant of the environment in which classroom instruction takes place, regardless if conducted virtually or in the face-to-face setting (Galbraith & Shedd, 1999). If the educational environment is a face-to-face setting, the atmosphere should be comfortable and attractive, contain good lighting and ventilation, present colorful yet appealing décor, possess comfortable temperature settings, be absent of outside distractions, and allow for students to clearly hear/see the educator and material regardless of their physical location in the classroom area (Galbraith & Shedd, 1999). However, if the educational environment is in the distance education setting, the

classroom environment should still appear to be comfortable and attractive while also including many of the previously stated elements. This can often be achieved by the use of engaging visual elements such as the incorporation of animated clip art, media, appealing announcements, clear deadlines and expectations, and designed in a way that is both user-friendly and aesthetically pleasing for the student. Opportunities to interact with nontraditional adult learners individually or in small group settings can also be built into all types of learning experiences in both the distance education and face-to-face learning environments (Gadbow, 2002).

Ultimately, the attitudes and responses of educators and/or administrators can greatly affect nontraditional adult students' abilities to succeed in higher education institutions (Gadbow, 2002). While environmental learning accommodations are sometimes required, other elements to a nontraditional adult students' learning success can be just as important such as patience, understanding, support, and acceptance from family members, colleagues, peers, instructors, significant others, and more (Gadbow, 2002). Working to provide an education climate which fosters self-development and self-efficacy is vital for nontraditional adult learners so they can better discover how and in what environments they learn best (Gadbow, 2002). Perhaps with a further investigation into the actual academic, social, and environmental needs of the face-to-face nontraditional adult student population as compared to the distance education nontraditional adult student population, researchers will be better equipped in understanding the actual needs of the nontraditional adult learner, regardless of their chosen learning environment. In doing so, educators and administrators will be better equipped to meet the growing needs of this ever-increasing student population.

Chapter Summary

Understanding the needs of nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education setting is becoming increasingly more important as enrollments in this student population are on the rise. However, with more nontraditional adult learners choosing to drop-out of the collegiate environment within their first year of enrollment with the college or university as compared to their more traditional counterparts, learning more regarding nontraditional adult learner needs could be the key to changes in student persistence, retention, and graduation rates in these nontraditional adult student populations (Hardin, 2008). The literature suggests that learning more regarding the academic, social, and environmental needs of these student populations could be the needed link in developing better policies, courses, programs, and support services which foster better learning environments for nontraditional adult learners in both the distance education and face-to-face classroom settings while also avoiding more commonly used generalizable approaches to learning.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Introduction

With face-to-face and distance education nontraditional adult learner student enrollments increasing each year, understanding the academic, social, and environmental needs of these student populations is becoming even more vital to today's collegiate environments (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). As colleges and universities attempt to keep up with the dramatic increases in postsecondary education enrollments from nontraditional adult learners, elements of the collegiate atmosphere such as course/program design, support services, and more will be of great focus (Watters, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

This research study examined the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face on-campus collegiate setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the distance education collegiate setting. Understanding the academic, social, and environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learners is an important factor in working to create classroom learning environments which are more conducive to aiding nontraditional adult learners in meeting their educational goals. Further, better understanding the academic, social, and environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners as compared to on-campus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners can better aid colleges and universities in their attempts to improve in the areas of student retention, persistence, motivation, and even graduation rates.

As the popularity of distance education courses with nontraditional adult students continues to rise in the college and university settings, educators and administrative staff will need to continue to explore the academic, social, and environmental needs of this specific student population to avoid a "one size fits all" approach to learning. And while there is an abundance of research investigating these variables in the more traditional face-to-face classroom environment, there is a clear gap in the research in terms of nontraditional adult student academic, social and environmental needs in the distance education setting. Examining the stated academic, social, and environmental needs of these adult learners in a distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult students in the face-to-face setting will help aid colleges and universities in obtaining better insights into this ever-growing student population and their potentially different needs.

There was a need for this research study as the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners from both a distance education and face-to-face setting standpoint have yet to be fully explored. This study addressed this need by comparing undergraduate nontraditional adult learners' stated academic, social, and environmental needs in the distance education learning environment as compared to the academic, social, and environmental needs of face-to-face nontraditional adult learner undergraduate students.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

2. What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

3. What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

This chapter presents a description of the process used in this research study. Specifically, it describes the research design employed, the sample selection, description of the sample, data collection procedures, protection of human subjects, development of instrumentation, data coding, and statistical analysis used for the study's collected data.

Design of the Study

This study used quantitative research measures in its design through the use of an electronic online survey. The survey, with a stratified random sample of nontraditional adult learners, was used to measure responses to each of the research questions. The academic, social and environmental needs variables were used from the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire which was primarily based on Countryman's (2006) Adult Learner Needs Survey. Three one-way Analysis of Variance tests were used to compare the responses for each construct (academic, social, and environmental scales) to the student's learning environment (face-to-face or distance education). The SPSS statistical analysis program was used to analyze participant data gathered through this research study.

Protection of Human Participants

The purposes and procedures for this research study were thoroughly detailed through written directives and responses (see Appendix A). The research protocol, information letter, invitational email, invitational reminder email, and survey instrument were carefully reviewed and approved by the researcher's dissertation committee, Auburn University's Institutional

Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB), and Southeastern Community College's Chair of Institutional Research (see Appendix B).

Research study participants were provided an information letter (see Appendix A) which served as the Waiver of Documentation of Consent. Further, the electronic online survey did ask all potential research study participants to indicate consent to participate in the research study through the use of a gated question at the beginning of the electronic survey. If potential research study participants indicated their consent to participate by choosing "Yes, I consent," they were then provided with access to the electronic survey. However, if potential research study participants did not provide consent to participate in the research study and thus chose "No, I do not consent," they were directed to the end of the survey without access to the full electronic survey instrument.

Potential research study participants were sent an invitational email which invited the students to participate in the research study. This invitational email also provided a short overview of the purpose of the research study, the electronic online survey link, and information on the benefits of such research. The invitational email also briefly discussed any associated risks for research study participants as well as the precaution taken to reduce such risks so as to better preserve anonymity and confidentiality of research study participants. The students were also encouraged to review the accompanying information letter for additional information regarding the research study.

Sample Selection

A research study request email along with an attached information letter was sent to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Southeastern Community College. After receipt of both this research request email and information letter, an Application for Human Subjects form,

Project Description, invitational email, invitational reminder email, and survey instrument was submitted to the Southeastern Community College Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). After a full review of these materials, Southeastern Community College's Institutional Review Board granted the researcher approval to conduct the research study at their institution contingent upon receiving official notification that the researcher's project was approved through Auburn University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (see Appendix D). Once approval was granted through Auburn University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, proof of such approval was then sent to Southeastern Community College's Institutional Review Board and full approval was granted to the researcher to utilize the Southeastern Community College student population for this research study (see Appendix B).

The sample used in this research study was comprised of a stratified random sample of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting. The survey instrument was administered to all study participants during the Fall 2015 semester. Southeastern Community College was chosen based on its diverse student population and centralized location in the United States.

Southeastern Community College is located in West Burlington, Iowa. The mission of Southeastern Community College is to provide accessible, quality courses, programs, and services which promote student success and economic vitality (Institutional Effectiveness, n.d.). The founding of Southeastern Community College was initially to serve the local West Burlington (North Campus) and Keokuk (South Campus) communities. However, through the colleges' expansions and distance education coursework, its student population could now be considered global in nature. Southeastern Community College currently enrolls approximately

2,900 students a semester with approximately 1,000 students attending via distance educational means (Enrollment Report, 2015).

Southeastern Community College was created to offer two-year associate degrees which are transferable to four-year institutions, two-year terminal degrees, and one or two year occupational certification programs. Student major areas include Arts and Sciences as well as Career Education programs. During the Fall 2015 semester, student enrollments were comprised of 78.0% Arts and Science majors and 22.0% Career Education majors (Enrollment Report, 2015). Further, the enrollments during this term were 44.6% full-time students and 55.4% part-time students (Enrollment Report, 2015).

The student population sample for this research study consisted of 498 nontraditional adult learners who were either male or female and over the age of 19 years old while also meeting any of the following criteria: financially independent student, employed full-time, postponed postsecondary education enrollment, married, person with dependents, a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college, a commuter student, and/or a veteran or active duty member of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives. The participant sample was selected from Southeastern Community College, located in West Burlington, Iowa.

The sample for this study consisted of one independent variable which was the learning environment (either distance or face-to-face); the dependent variables were the academic, social, and environmental needs scales. The sample consisted of 153 (30.7%) nontraditional distance education students and 345 (69.3%) face-to-face nontraditional adult students. To increase heterogeneity within the participant sample, research study participants were recruited from the actively enrolled student

population and not limited to one specific major, course, or other limiting factor which might not be generalizable to the population.

Data Collection Procedures

Once full approval to conduct the research study was granted by Southeastern Community College's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B), an invitational email (see Appendix C) along with the link to the electronic survey was sent to 800 actively enrolled Southeastern Community College students. This invitational email provided a short overview of the purpose of the research study, the electronic survey link, and information on the benefits of such research. The invitational email also briefly discussed any associated risks for research study participants as well as the precaution taken to reduce such risks so as to better preserve anonymity and confidentiality of research study participants. The students were also encouraged to review the accompanying information letter for additional information regarding the research study (see Appendix A). The information letter served as the Waiver of Documentation of Consent. An invitation reminder email was sent one week after the initial invitation email was sent to the students (see Appendix C). The survey was open for 14 days for completion.

Further, the electronic survey asked all potential research study participants to indicate consent to participate in the research study through the use of a gated question at the beginning of the electronic survey. If potential research study participants indicated their consent to participate by choosing the "Yes, I consent" option, the students were then provided access to the electronic survey. However, if potential research study participants did not provide consent to participate in the research study as they chose the "No, I do not consent" option, these students were directed to the end of the survey without access to the full electronic survey instrument.

The survey was administered using Qualtrics and no personal identifiers were tied to the participant survey responses. After the data collection was complete, all survey responses were compiled using Qualtrics and then taken and securely stored for computation in the SPSS statistical analysis program. No personal identifiers were listed so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality; no research study participants were linked to their responses. Further, no inducements were offered and participants were reminded that participation was completely voluntary and research participants could discontinue their participation in the research study at any time.

Instrument Development

The survey instrument used for this study was the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire which was based primarily on Countryman's (2006) Adult Learner Needs Survey. Both the Adult Leader Needs Survey and the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire work to assess adult learners' perceptions of academic, social, and environmental needs in the collegiate setting. The Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire (see Appendix E) is a four portion questionnaire which was employed to gather data regarding the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in both the distance education and more traditional on-campus face-to-face setting. The first portion of the survey instrument asks demographic questions which determined if the study participants could be classified as a nontraditional adult learner. For the purposes of this research study, a nontraditional adult learner was defined as a male or female actively enrolled student who was 19 years of age or older and met any of the following criteria: financially independent student, employed full-time, postponed postsecondary education enrollment, married, person with dependents, a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college, a commuter student, and/or a veteran or active duty member

of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives. The subsequent sections of the survey consisted of questions pertaining to the academic, social, and environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learner students. Specifically, the survey was comprised of three sections listed as follows: Part II: Academic Learning Needs, Part III: Social Needs, Part IV: Environmental Needs.

Research study participants utilized a four-point Likert-style scale for survey question responses. Each question was scored on an ordinal scale using the following options: Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important, and Not Important.

The first portion of the survey consisted of descriptive data questions, as previously discussed. The next portion of the survey was titled, "Part II: Academic Learning Needs." This area of the survey contained statements regarding the academic learning needs of nontraditional adult students. Further, it consisted of 18 statements which related to learning styles and techniques, academic resources and availability, class and faculty member availability, remedial courses, course offerings, and faculty status.

The next portion of the survey was titled, "Part III: Social Needs." This section of the survey contained statements regarding the social needs of nontraditional adult students. Further, it consisted of 18 statements which related to social needs and faculty interactions with students, peer/classmate interactions, social activities, organizational and/or social club campus involvement, attendance at campus-related events, opportunities to socially interact with peers and/or faculty members, connecting with classmates, creating relationships, and job placement.

The final portion of the survey was titled, "Part IV: Environmental Needs." This portion of the survey consisted of statements which related to the students' environmental needs. Additionally, this section consisted of 18 statements which related to the environmental needs of

these nontraditional adult learner students including transfer credits, future employment opportunities, disability accommodations, health and daycare services, financial aid, classroom learning environment, campus and faculty support services, as well as friends and family support networks.

Data Collection and Coding

An invitational email (see Appendix C) along with the link to the electronic survey was sent to 800 actively enrolled Southeastern Community College students by the college's Internal Review Board. This invitational email provided a short overview of the purpose of the research study, the electronic survey link, and information on the benefits of such research. The invitational email also briefly discussed any associated risks for research study participants as well as the precaution taken to reduce such risks so as to better preserve anonymity and confidentiality of research study participants. The students were also encouraged to review the accompanying information letter for additional information regarding the research study (see Appendix A). The information letter served as the Waiver of Documentation of Consent. An invitation reminder email was sent one week after the initial invitation email was sent to the students (see Appendix C).

The survey was administered using Qualtrics and no personal identifiers were tied to the participant survey responses. After the data collection was complete, all survey responses were compiled using Qualtrics and then taken and securely stored for computation in the SPSS statistical analysis program. No personal identifiers were listed so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality; no research study participants were linked to their responses. Further, no inducements were offered and participants were reminded that participation was completely voluntary and they could discontinue their participation in the research study at any time.

Once the survey officially closed, all survey responses were compiled using Qualtrics and then taken and securely stored for computation in the SPSS statistical analysis program. To analyze the research participant data, three one-way Analysis of Variance tests were used to compare means between distance education nontraditional adult learners and face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting as their responses pertained to the academic, social, and environmental needs of these learners. The one-way Analysis of Variance was chosen as the preferred analytical method for this research study as is it works to determine whether there are significant differences between the means of two or more independent groups in relation to the dependent variable (One-way ANOVA, n.d.).

The independent variable of this research study was the student's learning environment (either distance or face-to-face); the dependent variables were the academic, social, and environmental needs scales. These one-way Analysis of Variance tests compared the sum responses for each construct (academic, social, and environmental needs scales) to the independent variable (face-to-face or distance education).

Chapter Summary

This chapter consisted of the introduction, design of the study, protection of human rights, sample selection, data collection procedures, instrument development, and data collection and coding. The methods employed in this research study focused on collecting data from both part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners, as defined by this study. Lastly, the chapter discussed the description of the survey instrument and methods used to analyze the data. Chapter IV explores the results of the statistical analyses from the collected participant data.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

Working to better understand the academic, social, and environmental needs of both distance education and face-to-face nontraditional learners will aid colleges and universities in gaining better insights into how to better assist and support this ever-growing student population. The purpose of this study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. This study identified the stated academic, social, and environmental needs of adult learners in the distance education environment as compared to nontraditional adult students in the face-to-face setting. There was a great need for this research as the academic, social, and environmental needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner populations had yet to be fully explored, especially in the distance education setting.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding the needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting is vital as colleges and universities are working to expand distance educational offerings and programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face on-campus nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary

course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. This study identifies the differences in academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education environment as compared to nontraditional adult students in the face-to-face setting. There is a need for this research as the academic, social, and environmental needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner populations have yet to be fully explored, especially in the distance education setting. Because of this need, the following research questions were explored.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

2. What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

3. What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

This study had three primary goals: (1) to determine the academic needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; (2) to determine the social needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; and (3) to determine the environmental needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting. There was a need for this

study as at present, there is a lack of research in this area as the specific needs of these nontraditional adult learners have yet to be fully explored. By focusing on these academic, social, and environmental needs, distance education and traditional on-campus programs in the college and university settings can work to better serve the specific needs of the nontraditional adult learner student population.

Chapter IV explores the results of the research data analysis. The chapter will first begin with the internal consistency reliability and validity information for the survey instrument used to gather participant data. After this has been discussed, a description of the sample will be explored. And lastly, the quantitative data results from the research data analysis will be provided. The last portion of Chapter IV will provide a summary of the research study's findings.

Instrumentation of Reliability and Validity

The survey instrument used for this study was the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire which was based primarily on Countryman's (2006) Adult Learner Needs Survey. Both the Adult Leader Needs Survey and the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaires work to assess adult learners' perceptions of academic, social, and environmental needs in the collegiate setting. The validity of Countryman's Adult Learner Needs Survey was established through both a validation panel as well as a pilot test for the survey. The Adult Learner Needs Survey instrument "was pilot-tested with a sample of fifteen faculty members and thirty students at Chattahoochee Valley Community College" (Countryman, 2006, p. 62). The instrument was also pilot tested on the researcher's dissertation committee at that time. Further, the content reliability of the survey was established using Cronbach's alpha. Results showed that the reliability of the survey was strong with a Cronbach's alpha of .83 for academic needs, .91 for social needs, and .81 for

environmental needs (Countryman, 2006, p. 62). Lastly, the reliability of the study based on the sample was also established using Cronbach's alpha. The results here indicated that the reliability of the study was strong with a Cronbach's alpha of .80, based on the sample.

Description of the Sample

The sample used in this research study was comprised of a stratified random sample of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting. The survey instrument was administered to all study participants during the Fall 2015 semester. Southeastern Community College was chosen based on its diverse student population and centralized location in the United States.

The student population sample for this research study consisted of 498 nontraditional adult learners who were either male or female and over the age of 19 years old while also meeting any of the following criteria: financially independent student, employed full-time, postponed postsecondary education enrollment, married, person with dependents, a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college, a commuter student, and/or a veteran or active duty member of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives. The participant sample was selected from Southeastern Community College, located in West Burlington, Iowa.

The sample for this study consisted of one independent variable which was the learning environment (either distance or face-to-face); the dependent variables were the academic, social, and environmental needs scales. As a whole, 498 part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners participated in this research study. Of these student participants, 153 were nontraditional distance education students and 345 face-to-face nontraditional adult students. Further, 143 were males and 355 were females. The students' marital statuses were as follow: 76

married, 17 divorced, 1 widowed, 5 separated, 399 never been married. Additionally, 66 were employed full-time while 194 were employed part-time; 238 were not employed currently. Lastly, 438 were considered full-time students while 60 were considered part-time students. Of these students, 153 primarily have been enrolled in distance education courses while 345 were primarily enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses.

To increase heterogeneity within the participant sample, research study participants were recruited from the actively enrolled student population and not limited to one specific major, course, or other limiting factor which might not be generalizable to the population. The following tables are included to further illustrate the sample description. Table 1 illustrates participating nontraditional adult learners' employment status. Table 2 explores participating nontraditional adult learners' genders. Table 3 describes participating nontraditional adult learners' student status. And Table 4 illustrates participating nontraditional adult learners' marital status while Table 5 notes participating nontraditional adult learners' primary learning environment.

Table 1

Participating Nontraditional Adult Learners' Employment Status

Employment	*n*	Male	Female
Full-time	66	28	38
Part-time	194	41	153
Not employed	238	74	164
Total	498	143	355

N = 498

Table 2

Participating Nontraditional Adult Learners' Gender

Gender	*n*	Distance	Face-to-Face
Male	143	39	104
Female	355	114	241
Total	498	153	345

N = 498

Table 3

Participating Nontraditional Adult Learners' Student Status

Gender	*n*	Male	Female
Full-time	438	125	313
Part-time	60	18	42
Total	498	143	355

N = 498

Table 4

Participating Nontraditional Adult Learners' Marital Status

Marital Status	*n*	Male	Female
Married	76	27	49
Divorced	17	6	11
Widowed	1	0	1
Separated	5	0	5
Never Married	399	110	289
Total	498	143	355

N = 498

Table 5

Participating Nontraditional Adult Learners' Learning Environment

Gender	*n*	Distance	Face-to-Face
Male	143	39	104
Female	355	114	241
Total	498	153	345

N = 498

Quantitative Data Findings

In this section, the research study results in relation to the previously discussed research questions will be fully explored. To analyze the research participant data, three one-way Analysis of Variance tests were used to compare means between distance education nontraditional adult learners and face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate

setting as their responses pertained to the academic, social, and environmental needs of these learners. The one-way Analysis of Variance was chosen as the preferred analytical method for this research study as is it works to determine whether there are significant differences between the means of two or more independent groups in relation to the dependent variable (One-way ANOVA, n.d.). In this section, the results of the participant data analyses as such pertains to the research question are discussed.

Academic Needs

Research Question One was, "What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?" A one-way ANOVA test was employed to examine the potential relationship between nontraditional adult learner distance education students' academic needs as compared to the academic needs of the nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face on-campus collegiate setting. The one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data with statistical significance set at 0.05. The descriptive results indicated that the mean of students who are enrolled as nontraditional adult learner distance education students was 1.72 with a standard deviation of .47, while the mean for nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face educational setting was 1.70 with a standard deviation of .45. The one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences in academic needs for nontraditional adult learner distance education students as compared to nontraditional adult learners who are enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses, $F(1,501) = .188$, $p = .66$). Table 6 better examines this information.

Table 6

One-way ANOVA of Mean Academic Needs

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.040	1	.040	.188	.665
Within Groups	105.526	501	.211		
Total	105.566	502			

Research Question Two was "What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?" A one-way ANOVA test was employed to examine the potential differences between nontraditional adult learner distance education students' social needs as compared to the stated social needs of the nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face on-campus collegiate setting. The one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data with statistical significance set at 0.05. The descriptive results indicated that the mean of students who are enrolled as nontraditional adult learner distance education students was 2.09 with a standard deviation of .77, while the mean for nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face educational setting was 1.89 with a standard deviation of .63. The one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in social needs for nontraditional adult learner distance education students as compared to nontraditional adult learners who are enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses, $F(1,497) = 9.19$, $p = .003$). Table 7 better examines this information.

Table 7

One-way ANOVA of Mean Social Needs

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.201	1	4.201	9.186	.003
Within Groups	227.294	497	.457		
Total	231.495	498			

Research Question Three was "What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?" A one-way ANOVA test was employed to examine the potential relationship between nontraditional adult learner distance education students' environmental needs as compared to the environmental needs of the nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face on-campus collegiate setting. The one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data with statistical significance set at 0.05. The descriptive results indicated that the mean of students who are enrolled as nontraditional adult learner distance education students was 1.70 with a standard deviation of .52, while the mean for nontraditional adult learner students in the face-to-face educational setting was 1.61 with a standard deviation of .43. The one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences in environmental needs for nontraditional adult learner distance education students as compared to nontraditional adult learners who are enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses, $F(1,499) = 3.46$, $p = .06$). Table 8 better examines this information.

Table 8

One-way ANOVA of Mean Environmental Needs

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.730	1	.730	3.456	.064
Within Groups	105.358	499	.211		
Total	106.088	500			

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the results of the statistical analyses from the collection of participant data. When three one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were performed to examine the potential relationship between nontraditional adult learner distance education students' academic, social, and environmental needs as compared to the needs of nontraditional adult learner face-to-face in the collegiate setting, the results indicated a significant interaction occurred between the differences in student's learning environments (distance or face-to-face) and the students' social needs as nontraditional adult learners. No other relationship was found through the analyses of research study participant data. Chapter V discusses the findings of this study in further detail while also expounding on the implications for colleges and universities. This chapter will also discuss areas for further research and a summarization of the research study.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. Working to better understand the needs of these nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to on-campus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners will better aid colleges and universities in their attempts to improve in the areas of student retention, persistence, motivation, and even graduation rates.

This study had three primary goals: (1) to determine the academic needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; (2) to determine the social needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; and (3) to determine the environmental needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting.

The sample for this study consisted of one independent variable which was the learning environment (either distance or face-to-face); the dependent variables were the academic, social, and environmental needs scales. As a whole, 498 part-time and full-time nontraditional adult

learners participated in this research study. Of these student participants, 153 were nontraditional distance education students and 345 face-to-face nontraditional adult students. Further, 143 were males and 355 were females. The students' marital statuses were as follow: 76 married, 17 divorced, 1 widowed, 5 separated, 399 never been married. Additionally, 66 were employed full-time while 194 were employed part-time; 238 were not employed currently. Lastly, 438 were considered full-time students while 60 were considered part-time students. Of these students, 153 primarily have been enrolled in distance education courses while 345 were primarily enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses.

The sample used in this research study was comprised of a stratified random sample of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting. The survey instrument was administered to all study participants during the Fall 2015 semester. Southeastern Community College was chosen based on its diverse student population and centralized location in the United States.

The first portion of the survey instrument asked demographic questions which determined if the study participants could be classified as a nontraditional adult learner. For the purposes of this research study, a nontraditional adult learner was defined as a male or female actively enrolled student who was 19 years of age or older and met any of the following criteria: financially independent student, employed full-time, postponed postsecondary education enrollment, married, person with dependents, a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college, a commuter student, and/or a veteran or active duty member of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives. The subsequent sections of the survey consisted of questions pertaining to the academic, social, and environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learner

students. Specifically, the survey was comprised of three sections listed as follows: Part II: Academic Learning Needs, Part III: Social Needs, Part IV: Environmental Needs.

Research study participants utilized a four-point Likert-style scale for survey question responses. Each question was scored on an ordinal scale using the following options: Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important, and Not Important.

The first portion of the survey consisted of descriptive data questions, as previously discussed. The next portion of the survey was titled, "Part II: Academic Learning Needs." This area of the survey contained statements regarding the academic learning needs of nontraditional adult students. Further, it consisted of 18 statements which related to learning styles and techniques, academic resources and availability, class and faculty member availability, remedial courses, course offerings, and faculty status.

The next portion of the survey was titled, "Part III: Social Needs." This section of the survey contained statements regarding the social needs of nontraditional adult students. Further, it consisted of 18 statements which related to social needs and faculty interactions with students, peer/classmate interactions, social activities, organizational and/or social club campus involvement, attendance at campus-related events, opportunities to socially interact with peers and/or faculty members, connecting with classmates, creating relationships, and job placement.

The final portion of the survey was titled, "Part IV: Environmental Needs." This portion of the survey consisted of statements which related to the students' environmental needs. Additionally, this section consisted of 18 statements which related to the environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learner students including transfer credits, future employment opportunities, disability accommodations, health and daycare services, financial aid, classroom

learning environment, campus and faculty support services, as well as friends and family support networks.

The quantitative research data results indicated the following from the three research questions presented. For Research Question One, "What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?", the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test indicated that no significant interaction existed between distance education nontraditional adult learners as compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learner in regards to academic needs in the collegiate setting. Distance education nontraditional learners did not score any differently than face-to-face nontraditional learners in regards to their academic needs in the collegiate educational setting.

For Research Question Two, "What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?", the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test indicated that a significant interaction existed between distance education nontraditional adult learners as compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learner in regards to social needs in the collegiate setting. This significant interaction suggests that there is a potential difference in social needs for distance education nontraditional learners as compared to face-to-face nontraditional learners in the collegiate educational setting.

For Research Question Three, "What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?", the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test indicated that no significant interaction existed between distance education nontraditional adult

learners as compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learner in regards to environmental needs in the collegiate setting. Distance education nontraditional learners did not score any differently than face-to-face nontraditional learners in regards to their environmental needs in the collegiate educational setting.

Implications

A large portion of current undergraduate student populations are considered nontraditional students in some way as many are considered older students, parents, employed, financially independent, and/or students who enroll in college without a traditional high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education NCES, 2002). Many of these nontraditional adult learners are older students completing their initial education in the college or university environment, returning to the collegiate environment after some time spent away, employed/unemployed, parents returning to the workforce, older adults facing retirement, and/or seeking to improve their current life situations (Watters, 2003). Because these nontraditional adult students are enrolling in colleges and universities for a wide variety of motives, purposes, and expectations, it has been suggested that these student possess vastly different needs from more traditional students in terms of education, guidance, and support (Watters, 2003). And while the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) notes that although an increasing amount of educators and administrators now recognize the important role that college support services can play in working to meet the needs of this nontraditional adult student population, there still appears to be a misconception present which insinuates that nontraditional adult students are almost completely self-supportive and do not require the same level of support, guidance, and/or interactions as younger, more traditional student populations. As can be seen through the many challenges nontraditional adult students face when trying to complete their

educational goals, it can be safe to assume that these students need at least the same level of support as more traditional students, if not more in some cases (Hardin, 2008).

The results of this research study found that no statistically significant differences in academic and environmental needs were found in nontraditional adult students enrolled in distance education courses versus nontraditional adult learners enrolled in face-to-face on-campus courses. However, a significant relationship was found to exist between nontraditional adult learners enrolled in face-to-face courses and nontraditional adult learners enrolled in distance education courses regarding the social needs for each of these student populations.

With this in mind, several implications can be deduced from the results of this research study which may be beneficial for both colleges and universities. These implications will be discussed below.

Implications for Colleges and/or Universities

As colleges and universities are searching for more effective ways to increase student retention, persistence, and graduation rates, the results of this research study and literature review could be beneficial in aiding colleges and universities gain further insight into the academic, social, and environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learner student populations. As enrollment trends continue to rise with nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate environment, higher education institutions must seek to evaluate their effectiveness in regards to the services they currently offer for meeting the needs of nontraditional adult learner in both the face-to-face and distance educational settings (Gast, 2013). This research study can aid both colleges and universities in working to better tailor such services to best accommodate the unique and diverse needs of nontraditional adult learners in both the face-to-face and distance education setting. In working to better meet the needs of this increasing student population,

higher education institutions will be better able to more adequately support and retain nontraditional adult students throughout the collegiate process all the way to graduation (Gast, 2013).

As most nontraditional adult students choose to drop-out in their first semester enrolled in the collegiate setting, a greater focus on the successful transition to the college environment as well as acquiring successful academic and social connections in this collegiate environment could prove to be a great factor in reducing these drop-out rates (Rendon, 1995). Further, a greater focus on the diverse social needs of nontraditional adult students enrolled in both the face-to-face and distance education setting should be taken into considered when working on course design methods, curriculum choices, and overall classroom structure as such can provide key elements to the promotion of nontraditional adult student success in the classroom environment while also helping these students to make a more seamless transition to the collegiate setting (Ely, 1997; Rendon, 1995; Tyler, 1993).

Additionally, the research suggests that college and university administrators, educators, and staff must work to create educational climates which are supportive, challenging, friendly, not overly formal, open, and spontaneous for the student (Knox, 1974). An effective nontraditional adult learning environment, both in the face-to-face environment as well as the distance education environment, should work to create feelings of safety, relationship building, respect for student learners as decision-makers, positive teamwork climates, be engaging for the learner, all while keeping the student accountable in their educational experiences (Vella, 2002). Employing these various characteristics and elements, which are generally referred to as social interaction teaching methods, are instructional strategies which are employed by the educator to facilitate student-centered teamwork experiences in the classroom environment (Chulup &

Collins, 2010). By utilizing the social interaction teaching method, nontraditional adult students are helping each other to create meaning through teamwork and/or group project assignments, group discussions, and overall cooperative learning experiences all while working to better meet the distinctly different social needs of these nontraditional adult learner student populations (Burden & Byrd, 2007).

As educators and administrators work to better meet the academic, social, and environmental needs of both nontraditional adult learners in the distance education and face-to-face course settings, there must be greater consideration for the differences in nontraditional adult student needs based on their chosen learning environment. In considering such, the often detrimental generic one size fits all method can be avoided.

Even a simple concept such as student dialogue should be taken into consideration when examining the differences in social needs for both nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting as compared to those in the distance education setting. For example, while students who are present in face-to-face courses often discuss the course material through classroom dialoguing and more formally designed classroom discussion assignments, distance education students can also discuss the material as well using online discussion forums. And while traditional face-to-face students are often limited by their geographical proximity to each other, today's nontraditional adult students who are enrolled in distance education courses can be involved in online course discussion forums composed of students and educators who are located all around the world (Cook, 1995). The online class discussion forums allow nontraditional adult students the ability to collaborate and socially connect on the course material, even by just working together on assignments or performing a group task which may have been more difficult if completed individually (Eastmond, 1998).

Other techniques could also be employed when working to create a more effective social climate in both the face-to-face and distance education classroom environment. For example, Galbraith and Shedd (1990) suggested that instructors start by introducing themselves to the students enrolled in their classes while also taking the time to explain their educational philosophies, the roles they see themselves taking in the students' learning experiences, the expectations they have for what roles the learners should take in the course, the importance of the subject matter along with how it interconnects to the students' personal/professional goals, and how the course will aid them in their personal/professional endeavors. Additionally, educators should have the students introduce themselves including personal and professional information as well as the reason they chose to enroll in the course (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990). Not only can educators gain valuable information from these experiences, but learners can also connect with other peers who may be enrolled in the course for the same reasons, hold similar goals, expectations, fears, anxieties, and more (Galbraith & Shedd, 1990).

Nontraditional adult learners often express feelings of isolation while enrolled in college and/or university courses. In fact, Nordstrom (1997) stated that nontraditional adult learners often become easily isolated from their academic communities and that their overall successes in the higher education environment can often depend on the opportunities these students have to interact with peers who possess similar goals, interests, and personal/professional life roles. Helping these nontraditional adult learners socially integrate and interact with faculty members and peers can help these students overcome feelings of isolation in the higher education environment thus allowing them to be generally more successful in their academic pursuits (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Hardin, 2008).

The findings presented from this research study can aid colleges and universities with both distance education and traditional on-campus course offerings and programs in better understanding the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners while also helping these colleges and universities prepare for future program planning and course design. College and university faculty, administrators, and course designers will find this information useful in helping them to meet set learning objectives while also creating a learning environment which best meets the needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner student populations.

Areas for Further Research

The researcher recommends that this research study be replicated using traditionally defined undergraduate student populations primarily enrolled in either distance education or face-to-face college courses. Such research could also better aid colleges and universities in regards to course design methods, curriculum choices, and overall classroom structure for these specific student populations.

Additionally, it would be of interest to replicate this research study using English Second Language Students as the independent variable as differences in culture might suggest differing results in terms of the academic, social, and environmental needs of these nontraditional adult learners.

Lastly, qualitative methods might also be considered in future research studies of this nature to allow for a more extensive exploration of the research study participant responses. Conducting interviews for nontraditional adult learners enrolled in either distance education courses or face-to-face courses could further explore the specific academic, social, and environmental needs of these student populations.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this research study was to examine the academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education learning environment compared to face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in order to improve post-secondary course offerings and programs as a whole within the college and university settings. This study worked to identify potential differences in the stated academic, social, and environmental needs of nontraditional adult learners in the distance education environment as compared to nontraditional adult students in the face-to-face setting. There was a great need for this research as the academic, social, and environmental needs of these specific nontraditional adult learner populations had yet to be fully explored. The study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in academic needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?
2. What are the differences in social needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?
3. What are the differences in environmental needs of distance education nontraditional adult learners versus face-to-face nontraditional adult learners in the collegiate setting?

This research study had three primary goals: (1) to determine the academic needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; (2) to determine the social needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting; and (3) to determine the environmental

needs of part-time and full-time nontraditional adult learners in the distance education setting as compared to nontraditional adult learners in the face-to-face setting.

The research study consisted of sample of 498 nontraditional adult learners that were 19 years of age or older any of the following criteria: financially independent student, employed full-time, postponed postsecondary education enrollment, married, person with dependents, a person who, as a result of death or divorce, is now single and enrolled in college, a commuter student, and/or a veteran or active duty member of the United States military who is pursuing completion of a degree to enhance their professional and/or personal lives. The participant sample was selected from Southeastern Community College, located in West Burlington, Iowa. The research study participants completed the Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire which was primarily based on Countryman's (2006) Adult Learner Needs Survey. Three one-way Analysis of Variance tests were used to compare the responses for each construct (academic, social, and environmental scales) to the student's learning environment (face-to-face or distance education). The SPSS statistical analysis program was used to analyze participant data gathered through this research study.

The quantitative findings from this research study indicated that a significant interaction occurred between nontraditional adult learner face-to-face students and nontraditional adult learner distance education students regarding their social needs in the collegiate setting. The research data found no statistically significant interaction in regards to academic and environmental needs in these same student populations.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTION INFORMATION LETTER

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

INFORMATION LETTER
for a Research Study entitled
"A Comparison of Face-to-Face On-Campus and Distance Education Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Learner Students' Academic, Social, and Environmental Needs in the Collegiate Setting"

You are invited to participate in a research study to better understand the academic, social and environmental needs of adult learners in their learning environment in order to improve the way colleges are addressing the needs of this group. The study will compare the differences in traditional on-campus adult learners and distance educated adult learners' academic, social and environmental needs in the college setting. Specific comparisons will be made between both on-campus and distance education enrolled full-time and part-time adult learners to see if there are any differences in these needs based on their learning environment. This study is being conducted by Stephanie Davis, Doctoral Candidate at Auburn University, under the director of Dr. Maria Witte, Professor and Faculty Advisor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. You are invited to participate because you are an actively enrolled student at Southeastern Community College and are at least 18 years of age or older.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a short e-survey. Your total time commitment will be approximately 8 minutes.

The risk associated with participating in this study is that the survey is administered using electronic means which could mean confidentiality could be compromised. However, no personal identifiers will be listed on the survey responses so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality that no participants were linked to their responses. The Qualtrics survey results will be saved onto an encrypted server; the data is to be stored on the researcher's password protected personal computer locate in her home office. The data analysis will begin within no more than one week from the end date of the data collection process. When not in use, the computer will be password protected and locked at the researcher's home. Further, no compensation will be offered and no costs will be accumulated if you decide to participate in the research study.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time by simply closing your browser window. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Once you've submitted anonymous data, it cannot be withdrawn since it will be unidentifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Southeastern Community College and/or Auburn University, the Department of Adult Education.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by saving all survey results onto an encrypted server. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill the doctoral dissertation educational requirement and may also be published in a professional academic journal.
If you have questions about this study, please contact Stephanie Davis at SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu or (251) 234-9293.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION ABOVE, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE CLICK ON THE LINK BELOW.
YOU MAY PRINT A COPY OF THIS LETTER TO KEEP.

Stephanie Davis 9/4/2015

_____

Investigator Date

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from _____to_____. Protocol #_____

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cG6cCxjBejIAOGx

APPENDIX B

SCC APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROJECT

SCC | SOUTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

TO:	Stephanie Davis, Principal Investigator
FROM	Mary Ellen Ellyson, Chair, Southeastern Community College IRB
CC:	Dr. Michael Ash, President, Southeastern Community College
PURPOSE:	Conditional Approval of Research Project
DATE:	July 22, 2015
RE:	**A Comparison of On-Campus and Distance Learning Undergraduate Adult Learner...**

This letter is to advise you that Southeastern Community College (SCC) will allow Stephanie Davis, a doctoral candidate from Auburn University, to collect survey data for her dissertation from SCC students. This approval is contingent upon SCC's IRB receiving official notification that Ms. Davis's project has been approved by the University's IRB, along with all supporting documents.

WWW.SCCIOWA.EDU

WEST BURLINGTON CAMPUS 1500 West Agency Road, P.O. Box 180, West Burlington, IA 52655 / 319-752-2731 / Fax 319-752-4957
KEOKUK CAMPUS 335 Messenger Road, Keokuk, IA 52632 / 319-524-3221 / Fax 319-524-8621

APPENDIX C

INVITATIONAL EMAIL & EMAIL REMINDER

EMAIL INVITATION FOR ON-LINE SURVEY

Dear SCC Student,

I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Adult Education at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to better understand the academic, social and environmental needs of adult learners in their learning environment in order to improve the way colleges are addressing the needs of this group. You may participate if you are at least 19 years of age and actively enrolled as a student at Southeastern Community College.

Participants will be asked to click the e-survey link below and follow the prompts to participate in the research; the questionnaire will take approximately 8 minutes to complete. The following is the link to the questionnaire:

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cG6cCxjBejIAOGx

By participating in this research study, you will help colleges and universities alike to gain better insights into assisting adult learners by providing additional services and offerings which could be beneficial for you and other future students. To minimize risks associated with confidentiality of data, no personal identifiers will be listed on the survey responses so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending me an email. If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey from a link in the letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (251) 234-9293 or SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu or my advisor, Dr. Maria Witte at (334) 844-3078.

Thank you for your consideration,

Stephanie Davis
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Adult Education
Auburn University
(251) 234-9293
SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu

EMAIL INVITATION FOR ON-LINE SURVEY (REMINDER EMAIL)

Dear SCC Student,

This is a reminder e-mail in reference to the "Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire" that was sent to you via your Southeastern Community College email last week. If you have not completed the questionnaire and would still like to participate in the research study, please do so by Friday. Remember that all responses to the questions listed on the questionnaire are strictly anonymous and participation in completely voluntary. If you have completed your questionnaire, thank you for your time. Here in link to the questionnaire:

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cG6cCxjBejIAOGx

If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending me an email. If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey from a link in the letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (251) 234-9293 or SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu or my advisor, Dr. Maria Witte at (334) 844-3078.

Thank you for your consideration,

Stephanie Davis
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Adult Education Auburn University
(251) 234-9293
SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Add this approval information in sentence form to your electronic information letter!

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 10/27/15 to 10/26/16 Protocol # 15-403 EP 1510

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

INFORMATION LETTER
for a Research Study entitled
"A Comparison of Face-to-Face On-Campus and Distance Education Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Learner Students' Academic, Social, and Environmental Needs in the Collegiate Setting"

You are invited to participate in a research study to better understand the academic, social and environmental needs of adult learners in their learning environment in order to improve the way colleges are addressing the needs of this group. This study is being conducted by Stephanie Davis, Doctoral Candidate at Auburn University, under the director of Dr. Maria Witte, Professor and Faculty Advisor in the Auburn University Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. You are invited to participate because you are an actively enrolled student at Southeastern Community College and are at least 18 years of age or older.

What will be involved if you participate? Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to complete a short e-survey. Your total time commitment will be approximately 8 minutes.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risk associated with participating in this study is that the survey is administered using electronic means which could mean confidentiality could be compromised. To minimize these risks, we will have no personal identifiers listed on the survey responses so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality that no participants were linked to their responses. The Quatrics e-survey results will be imported into SPSS for statistical analysis and saved as an encrypted file on a flash drive. The data analysis will begin within one week from the end date of the data collection process. The flash drive will be stored in a locked cabinet drawer in Dr. Maria Witte's office - Haley Center Room 4012. Once data analysis is complete, the flash drive will be permanently destroyed.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? By participating in this research study, you will help colleges and universities alike to gain better insights into assisting adult learners by providing additional services and offerings which could be beneficial for you and other future students.

Will you receive compensation for participating? No compensation will be offered but your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Are there any costs? No costs will be accumulated if you decide to participate in the research study.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time by simply closing your browser window. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Once you've submitted anonymous data, it cannot be withdrawn since it will be unidentifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Southeastern Community College and/or Auburn University, the Department of Adult Education.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by saving all survey results onto an encrypted server. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill the doctoral dissertation educational requirement and may also be published in a professional academic journal.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Stephanie Davis at SDD0010@tigermail.auburn.edu or (251) 234-9293.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION ABOVE, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE CLICK ON THE LINK BELOW.
YOU MAY PRINT A COPY OF THIS LETTER TO KEEP.

Stephanie Davis 9/4/2015

Investigator Date

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from _____to_____. Protocol #__

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eG6cCxjBejIAOGx

Add this approval information in sentence form to your electronic information letter!

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 10/27/15 to 10/26/16 Protocol # 15-403 EP 1510

APPENDIX E

INSTRUMENT

Adult Learner Needs Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to better understand the actual academic, social, and environmental needs of adult learners who are or have previously been enrolled in distance education courses. By participating in this study, you will assist college and university distance education programs in identifying better efforts to assist adult learners enrolled in distance education courses and programs. You are asked to complete this survey on adult learning needs to provide better insight into the actual academic, social, and environmental needs of distance education students.

General Directions: The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Try to rate yourself according to how important the statements are for you as an adult learner. Keep in mind that there is no "right" or "wrong" answer choice. All responses are strictly confidential in nature so please be as honest as possible with your responses. Please use the follow scale to rate each statement for Parts II, III, & IV; use the check boxes and fill in the blank areas for Part I:

"1" if the statement is NOT IMPORTANT to you.
"2" if the statement is SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT to you.
"3" if the statement is IMPORTANT to you.
"4" if the statement is VERY IMPORTANT to you.

PART I: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please check the one option that best describes you.

1. What is your sex?
   - ⎦ Male
   - ⎦ Female
2. Are you 19 years of age or older?
   - ⎦ Yes
   - ⎦ No
3. Are you:
   - ⎦ Married
   - ⎦ Divorced
   - ⎦ Widowed
   - ⎦ Separated
   - ⎦ Never been married
4. Are you currently a:
   - ⎦ Full time employee (employed more than 34 hours a week)
   - ⎦ Part time employee (employed less than 34 hours a week)
   - ⎦ Not employed

5. Are you currently a:
   - ⎦ Part-time student (enrolled in less than 12 semester hours a term)
   - ⎦ Full-time student (enrolled in 12 semester hours or more a term)
6. What type of courses have you previously been or currently are enrolled in:
   - ⎦ Face-to-face courses only
   - ⎦ Distance education (or "online courses") only
   - ⎦ I have taken both face-to-face and distance education courses

PART II: ACADEMIC/LEARNING NEEDS

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. Learning at my own pace	4	3	2	1
2. Creating confidence about learning	4	3	2	1
3. Academic resources for course material are readily accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	4	3	2	1
4. Availability of online resources relating to the institution (admissions, business, financial aid, etc.) available 24/7	4	3	2	1
5. Ability to interact, either face-to-face or via synchronous technology, in my courses during a set day/time each week	4	3	2	1
6. Self-paced class availability/course offerings	4	3	2	1
7. Faculty capable of working with my personal learning style	4	3	2	1
8. Faculty who are enthusiastic for teaching course material/content	4	3	2	1
9. Faculty who show true concern for student's course progress	4	3	2	1
10. Faculty availability during scheduled office hours for questions and/or extra help on course material	4	3	2	1
11. Faculty willingness to listen to student questions/opinions	4	3	2	1
12. Academic advisor who is concerned with my personal academic progress	4	3	2	1
13. College offers remedial education courses	4	3	2	1
14. Accessibility to tutorial labs and writing centers (e.g. Smarthinking, writing centers, and such)	4	3	2	1
15. Courses staffed by full-time rather than part-time faculty	4	3	2	1
16. Non-self-paced (due date sensitive) course offerings	4	3	2	1
17. Mini-term course offerings	4	3	2	1
18. Accelerated course offerings	4	3	2	1

PART III: SOCIAL NEEDS

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. Involvement in school related social clubs/organizations	4	3	2	1
2. Attending campus performances/activities/engagements	4	3	2	1
3. Faculty interested in helping students grow in more than just academic areas	4	3	2	1
4. Opportunities to meet and interact face to face socially with faculty members	4	3	2	1
5. Involvement in honors clubs	4	3	2	1
6. Face-to-face interactions with peers/classmates	4	3	2	1
7. Virtual interactions with peers/classmates	4	3	2	1
8. Making new friends while attending college	4	3	2	1
9. Participating in community service events related to the college I am attending	4	3	2	1
10. Availability of job placement programs through my college	4	3	2	1
11. Counseling services readily available at my college	4	3	2	1
12. Opportunities to develop social connections through my peers/colleagues at my college	4	3	2	1
13. Being able to make connections with faculty members outside of the college classroom	4	3	2	1
14. Having faculty members reach out to me via phone/email when I am struggling in the course	4	3	2	1
15. Creating personal connections with peers/classmates while attending college	4	3	2	1
16. Having opportunities to create supportive relationships with my fellow classmates through course projects/assignments	4	3	2	1
17. Participating in live lectures, either face-to-face or via virtual technology, for a course I am enrolled in	4	3	2	1
18. Academic advisor taking a personal interest in me outside of my academic progress	4	3	2	1

PART IV: ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
1. Tutoring services and writing labs are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week	4	3	2	1
2. Student healthcare services are available to me	4	3	2	1
3. Daycare services available to me for use	4	3	2	1
4. Certainty of financial aid services availability	4	3	2	1
5. Classroom environments are interactive and engaging	4	3	2	1
6. Instructor possess a positive and supportive tone in all communications	4	3	2	1
7. Classroom environment uses multiple technologies (e.g. Smartboards, video clips, audio recordings, etc.) to engage the learner	4	3	2	1
8. Course is presented in a way that is user-friendly and easily understood	4	3	2	1
9. Receiving encouragement/support from family and friends while enrolled in college courses	4	3	2	1
10. Ability to transfer credits to a four year institution	4	3	2	1
11. Ability easily obtain future employment upon degree completion	4	3	2	1
12. Learning environment is upbeat and free of distractions	4	3	2	1
13. Course/instructor is clear with expectations in regards to assignments/projects	4	3	2	1
14. Faculty is detailed with personalized and thorough assignment feedback	4	3	2	1
15. Students are able to complete assignments in a self-paced manner	4	3	2	1
16. A wide variety of courses are continually offered throughout a term with a variety of start/end dates	4	3	2	1
17. Detailed scoring rubrics are listed for each assignment	4	3	2	1
18. Family and/or friends are supportive of my educational goals and the things I must do to obtain these goals	4	3	2	1