A qualitative study of nontraditional African American female students' perceptions of the factors that contribute to their high attrition rate in a metropolitan Atlanta two-year college.

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ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

SHAW, NAKIA C.  B.A. STATE UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA, 1996
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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR HIGH ATTRITION RATES IN A METROPOLITAN ATLANTA TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Advisor: Dr. Sheila Gregory
Dissertation date May 2008

This study examined 10 nontraditional women at a small two-year institution. The study illuminated the challenges that these women faced as they matriculated and explored personal, professional, academic, institutional, financial resource, peer relationship, and professor relationship factors that they perceive could and has affected their attrition rates.

The findings emerged from a host of dominant themes that were generalized at the inception of the study. The participants mostly provided a clear understanding of their perceptions relative to the themes. Therefore, the participants’ responses provide an understanding of the relationships that the themes do or do not have to the participants’ contribution to the studied institution’s attrition rates.
The implications drew upon the research to bring forth a cause and effect understanding of the findings that if heeded could assist in decreasing the attrition rates for African-American female students. The recommendations were brought forth in an effort to provide a guiding post for future practices, policies, and research relative to understanding and adhering to the needs of nontraditional African-American female students.
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR HIGH ATTRITION RATES IN A METROPOLITAN ATLANTA TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

NAKIA C. SHAW

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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I give all of my thanks and honor to God for giving me the strength to make it through this tremendous challenge.

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I dedicate this dissertation to the best little girl in the world—my baby Madisyn. She is the wind beneath my wings. It is because of her that I strive to be the best woman that I can be. Mommy loves you infinitely!
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

*Age should never be a deterrent to achieving the highest level of education desired—Cheryl Maxwell*

*How is it possible to succeed when your self-perception is determined by an inaudible voice—Kia Shaw*

Since 1901, at least 100 million people have matriculated through community colleges. Over the last several decades the community college has become the gateway to higher education for many African-American students in urban communities. Community colleges across the spectrum of institutions have historically provided access to students that needed to attend an institution that was low in cost, and that provided an opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education to students that were not likely to be academically prepared for college (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003). These colleges have been known to provide an environment where students that may not have the needed academic preparation to immediately enter a four-year institution the opportunity to begin their collegiate careers (Patton, 2000). According to the National Center for Education statistics (2003), students that enter institutions are looking for environments that help them with attaining job skills, personal development, and the academic foundation to transfer to four-year institutions.
According to Allen (2000), over the last several decades the demographic for institutions has changed. Colleges are finding that their populations are becoming more and more diverse, and increasingly occupied by students that are nontraditional. The students that are considered nontraditional are the students that are over the age of 23 and have family, job, and life responsibilities in addition to their pursuit of a postsecondary education (Niner, 2006).

Historically, institutions have been effective transitional institutions. They have fostered wonderful environments for nontraditional students because they give students the academic attention they need before they consider moving on to matriculate at four-year institutions. They also provide nontraditional students the capability to grow in an environment that is conducive to learners that may have academic challenges, or that may need to become reacquainted with learning environments (Bowl, 2001). Thus, institutions are seemingly perfect environments for students that are interested in beginning postsecondary programs of study at a later age, but are not necessarily equipped for four-year institutions. Consequently, community colleges are wonderful environments for nontraditional student to begin their educational careers because they are able to bridge the gap between the student’s background, intellectual abilities, and economic potential past and present (Johnson, 2001).

The majority population of the students at the studied institution are African-American female students who are on average 27 years of age, have spouses and most likely, children. The students are most often those that delayed continuing their education due to life’s circumstances or because they decided to begin their working careers immediately following high school. They are students that, because of life’s
challenges, began to realize later in life that in order to advance professionally, they needed to attain a postsecondary education (Munford, 1996).

The nontraditional African-American female student population is increasing by leaps and bounds. According to Munford (1996), the population of African-American nontraditional female students that will enter institutions is going to continue to increase over the next decade. Astonishingly, the current population of nontraditional students has increased from 7.5% in 1980 to 19.5% in 2004, almost tripling the enrollment of African-American nontraditional female students (Munford, 1996).

Not only is the population of nontraditional students expanding, but so has the definition of what it means to be a nontraditional student. At one time to be a nontraditional student meant that the student had not come directly from high school, was financially independent, and was perhaps married or a parent. However, with the vast changes that are occurring in society, the demographic profile of the nontraditional student has become multidimensional. Institutions are seeing older women, with varied marital statuses, and varied ethnicities. However, even though, the population of nontraditional students is becoming increasingly minority, African-American female nontraditional students are accounting for the largest percentage of women that are attending college for the first time (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, the nontraditional student is an African-American female that is over the age of 25 and most likely works more than 20 hours per week. Most participants will have children and or a spouse, and will most likely attend classes in the evenings. The aforementioned factors are relevant because these factors and more have been indicators that suggest that the African-American nontraditional female
students' needs are significantly different from other nontraditional students, and though they are entering institutions in record numbers, they are failing to persist and their attrition rates are increasing. Thus, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of nontraditional African-American female students' perceptions of why they are not persisting, particularly in a metropolitan Atlanta institution.

Background of the Problem

The impetus for nontraditional African-American female students to return to institutions of higher education has generally been: career change, self-fulfillment, and completion of previously started degrees (Niner, 2006). Also, due to the vast changes that are occurring in the job market and the increasing desire of employers to have employees with higher levels of education, African-American females are realizing the relationship between job security, promotion, and their need to attain a postsecondary education. Consequently, they are seeking postsecondary educations in increasing numbers (Freeman, 2005).

In the 1970s, nontraditional students accounted for less than half of the total student populations in community colleges, now they account for over 60%, and that number is growing steadily (Ryan, 2003). Conversely, research indicates that the attrition rates for nontraditional African-American female students are high. This phenomenon is apparent at the studied institution because the population of nontraditional African-American female students is steadily increasing unfortunately their attrition rates are increasing as well.
Freeman (2005) stated that nontraditional students are also expressing that they are not getting the institutional support they need in order to matriculate successfully. He further stated that quite often nontraditional students report feeling ostracized in environments that they feel are more conducive to their more traditional peers. They report feeling out of place and disassociated from the group because of their life experience and mature world views. They report feelings of exclusion in the overall practices of the institution because of the times that they are able to attend classes. Nontraditional students report that they often feel ostracized and not afforded the same advantages as their more traditional peers. They further report having issue with being called nontraditional. For instance, the classification as “nontraditional” has proven to be the source of angst for some nontraditional students. They have expressed that the name inclusion of the prefix “non” is a misnomer and further disassociates them from the overall student population (Freeman, 2005).

It is unfortunate but due to the myriad of aforementioned issues and others, the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) shows that nontraditional students are not persisting as they should and are more likely to discontinue their degree programs without the attainment of a degree in the traditional two years. Also, the issues associated with nontraditional students are two fold. First, research suggests that students that seek community colleges as their initial entry into postsecondary education are more likely than not to discontinue before they graduate. Secondly, nontraditional students are more likely than not to discontinue their pursuit of a college education before the completion of their first year (NCES, 1999). Therefore, nontraditional African-American
female students that enter institutions are more likely than not to discontinue their pursuit of a degree before graduating.

Historically, the studied institution enrolls nontraditional students in large numbers and the majority of nontraditional students at the studied institution are on average 27 years of age. The students at the studied institution are also more likely to work full time, be parents, and, take classes in the evenings. However, the institutional support services that have been offered were more in accordance with an institution that caters to the more traditional college students. Yet, according to the studied institution, the majority of its students are nontraditional African-American female students. Nonetheless, the institution has a history of establishing policies and procedure that are in harmony with the servicing more traditional students.

Thus, it would appear that the students that are the foundation of the institution are not getting a fair chance at matriculating successfully. In addition to the lack of comprehensive evening courses, the academic support services that are offered for the day time students are less likely to be offered to evening students.

Statement of the Problem

_The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them_—Albert Einstein

A high school diploma is no longer sufficient in an increasingly competitive job market. In today's competitive job market employers are beginning to require postsecondary educations. African-American females that decided not to attend college after high school and instead went directly into the work force are finding that they are
not getting the same advancement opportunities as their more educated peers (Spreeter, 2006).

Nonetheless, after realizing the need to advance professionally will require additional education nontraditional African-American females students are entering colleges in particular in increasing numbers (Freeman, 2005). However, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1999), over 50% of African-American students will not persist to graduation. The college in particular places nontraditional African-American students at higher risks of dropping out without completing their anticipated degree.

Statistics support the need to pay closer attention to the needs of the nontraditional student because statistics show that approximately 50% of nontraditional students work full time, and that almost 90% of them delayed enrollment and were single parents (NCES, 1999). The NCES further reports that there is a disparity in the completion rates of African-American students that are from lower income families in comparison with their peers that are not from low income environments. The variation in income and completion is particularly significant to the studied institution because the overwhelming majorities of the students are from lower income backgrounds and are generally first generation college students.

Students that enter institutions are also more likely than not to require remedial sources. In fall 2000, 76% of postsecondary institutions offered at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course (NCES, 2003). Postsecondary transcripts of 1992 twelfth graders who enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 show that 61% of students who first attended a public and 25% who first attended a
Students who first attended public institutions were more likely than their peers at four-year institutions to enroll in a remedial reading course or one or two remedial mathematics courses. Also, according to the NCES, students that take remedial courses are less likely to earn a degree.

Furthermore, because the breath and depth of their experiences are different, nontraditional students report that some professors view their presence in classes as intrusive (Johnson, 2001). Nontraditional students report feeling disconnected from their peers because of their life experiences and age, and because as nontraditional students they have experienced the job market without an education and clearly understand its value. They feel the more traditional students may not have a complete understanding of the magnitude of attaining a postsecondary education. Additionally, nontraditional students account for an increasing percentage of the overall student population in institutions, but their attrition rates are among the highest (American College Testing [ACT], 2001).

Meanwhile, due to the gap between the number of nontraditional students entering institutions of higher learning and the attrition rates for this population of student, politicians have taken notice. Politicians are realizing that institutions are becoming largely populated by nontraditional students and that their needs are significantly different than their more traditional peers. They have also realized that nontraditional students are becoming the new majority, but are not persisting at a rate that is equivalent to their more traditional counterparts. Therefore, because of these realizations, politicians are taking notice and trying to improve program completion among these students (Lane,
Politicians are realizing that after all of the challenges that older students face when trying to pursue a college degree, unfortunately, they will also most likely be faced with the hurdle of financial challenges (Lane, 2004). Thus, Senator Hilary Clinton has taken notice to the challenges that nontraditional students are facing and in the past began an initiative to help them gain greater access to higher education through increases in federal grants made available specifically to nontraditional students. The monies would have been made available through financial vehicles such as the Pell Grant. The hope was that the Pell grant would be approved to increase from an award of $4050.00 to 11,050.00 over the next five years. The benefit to institutions such as the studied institution is that the award of Pell Grant will be for institutions that have in place programs that are supportive to nontraditional students. Therefore, institutions will be forced to institute academic programs and academic support programs that will be supportive of nontraditional students. The studied institution provides an excellent example of how nontraditional African-American female students contribute to the attrition rates of institutions. The studied institution is also an exemplary example of why understanding the needs of nontraditional students is so important to securing the futures of similar institutions.

For the studied institution the average age is 27 and at least 50% of the students are African-American females. The overwhelming majority of the studied population works in addition to attending classes. Yet historically, even though the majority of nontraditional students work during the day and take evening courses, they are unable to find the courses they need because sufficient classes have not been historically offered in the evening. The majority of courses that are not offered during evening hours were most
often offered during the day. Also, across the board evening students complain that institutional offices are not available to evening students. Finally, due to a change in administration, the problems that face nontraditional students at the studied institution are being more readily addressed. Unfortunately, even though these challenges are now being addressed, according to the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents (2007), the numbers of nontraditional students that enter this particular institution are drastically higher than the number of students that graduate, especially in the allotted time frame.

Purpose of the Study

African-American women are entering community colleges in greater numbers each year, but apart from general information about enrollment trends among African-Americans students, very little research has been conducted on success factors among this growing group of women who attend institutions. Research indicates that academic and social fit between individuals and the institution is an important factor in determining persistence among African-Americans in higher education (Hackett, 2002).

Why is it that the needs of African-American women in education have not been researched and given adequate attention? According to hooks (1981), “When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on African-American men and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women” (P. 7). Sadly the African-American female does not stand a chance in a country that does not holistically validate her existence. There is racism towards her, there is sexism towards her, but there has not been a place for her in either of the fights against feminism or racism. She has been the wet nurse, nanny, mother, sister, wife, cook, cotton picker, and now it is time that she has
something for herself and that something can and will begin with a quality education. The words of the legendary Sojourner Truth solidified the perceptions of the African-American female as a whole when she asked her infamous question, “Aint I a woman?” That question continues to resonate in the hearts and minds of the African-American woman because her plight has not been effectively addressed or respected since before the inception of slavery, and possibly beyond.

Historically, African-Americans have viewed education as if it provided the necessary foundation that is needed in order to become successful contributing members of society (Anderson, 1988). There are countless accounts in literature of the mainstream cultures needs relative to education and all other methods of socialization, but very few that focus specifically on the needs of African-American females. There is despair in this fact because the African-American female has been the glue that has held together families and she has toiled the earth of this nation, and ensured the well being of many families of varying ethnicities. Therefore, understanding her needs in relation to education is important because she is still at the core of many single parent families, and she still is not getting the access to education that she needs in order to solidify her place within society.

The relevance of studies such as this one was to validate the fact that the African-American female population of nontraditional students is expanding and therefore, their matriculation needs should be put into proper context within institutions such as the studied institution. Conversely, the relevance is to show that there is very little general information about the matriculation trends of African-American female students that could be found within the body of literature.
Thus, in order to decrease attrition rates for community colleges, institutions will need to provide services that are conducive to the success of all of its students, namely its largest population of students African-American female students. The first step is to identify the varied needs of students and provide the appropriate academic and academic support services. Hackett (2002) espouses that although African-American women succeed at higher rates than African-American men in community colleges, their success rates could be increased.

Nontraditional students, particularly African-American female students have a much higher attrition rate than their traditional counterparts. Due to life’s circumstances nontraditional students drop out of degree programs at alarming rates during their first year of matriculation. However, once they are enrolled through to their second year, the rate of consistent matriculation increases. Thus, there is a possibility that if institutional measures are taken specific to the retention of nontraditional African-American female students during their first year of matriculation, then the attrition rates could quite possibly decrease. According to Johnson (2001), there are several statistical and conceptual studies on the persistence of African-American students in higher education, but few qualitative studies that describe the experiences of African-American female students in community colleges.

The purpose of this study was to explore the causes of attrition rates among nontraditional African-American female students in a two-year institution, by getting an understanding of their perceptions relative to issues as to why they do not persist. The purpose was also to identify possible types of institutional support that would encourage retention. Finally, the intent of this study was to add to the body of research relative to
African-American female nontraditional students, because thus far while there is a solid body of research on persistence and attrition for college students, most of it has not been found within the research done for this study to be relative to African-American females students. The following are the research questions that were thought to best address the issues that are relative to understanding nontraditional African-American female students perceptions of their contribution to attrition.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a relationship between perceived personal factors and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American females?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between perceived professional factors and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between perceived academic preparation and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ4: Is there a relationship between perceived institutional support services and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ5: Is there a relationship between perceived financial resources and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ6: How do nontraditional African-American students describe their relationships with their peers as it relates to their feelings of inclusion in the overall academic and social environment at a two-year institution?
RQ7: How do nontraditional African-American students describe their relationships with their professors as it relates to their feelings of inclusion in the overall academic environment at a two-year institution?

Significance of the Study

African-American women are seeking postsecondary educations in increasing numbers. They are also more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be in midlife, unmarried, single parents, and employed in low paying jobs while trying to complete their programs of study (Munford, 1996). African-American women are more significantly marginalized in their work environments. Also, the majority of the students that enter the studied institution are from lower income environments and their academic exposure and influence is significantly different than students that come from more privileged environments (Horvat, 1996). Therefore, it is imperative given all of the obstacles that are relative to this population of student that special care is taken in ensuring that they have a successful collegiate matriculation, in this instance a matriculation relative to the completion of an associate's degree.

Thus, the significance of this study is to increase awareness of the matriculation needs of nontraditional African-American women in institutions. The knowledge brought forth in this study hopefully will assist colleges in the planning and delivery of curricular and cocurricular programs. This study also expounds on the research on African-American female nontraditional students. Currently, the theoretical approaches for students in higher education are mostly based on information on students that are more traditional in nature. This study will contribute to the research on nontraditional
students in general, but more importantly will help institutions like the studied institution better understand the needs of African-American nontraditional female students.

Summary

The intent of this study was to explore the needs and issues faced by nontraditional students. This research acknowledged the importance of documenting the perceptions of African-American female nontraditional students as a primary lens to capture barriers that complicate their academic journey. Hopefully the findings will be beneficial to nontraditional African-American female students, wherever they matriculate.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of the literature review was to support the topic of study through the use of relative research of the available literature on African-American female student matriculation needs. The topic of nontraditional students has been researched and studied in varying degrees, but very little literature could be found specific to studies of African-American female nontraditional students. According to bell hooks (1981), African-American women have for several decades been the forgotten population. Hooks is noted as having stated that: “No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (p. 7). Therefore, it is not surprising that even though they are the most increasing population entering institutions of higher learning, there is very little research that has been done to discuss their matriculation needs or patterns.

However, because there is very little research specific to the matriculation needs of African-American female nontraditional students, this review examined literature that garnered an understanding of the factors that contribute to the attrition rates of nontraditional students as a whole in two-year institutions. The examination of literature relative to nontraditional students was done with hopes that the literature could foster a foundation from which to study the needs of African-American nontraditional students.
Across the body of literature there seems to be some consistency relative to the factors that contribute to the attrition rates of nontraditional students. The areas of review were chosen because across the body of literature they were determined to have been the most revisited issues among nontraditional students, even though there was a question as to whether the relevant topics that were seen throughout the body of literature regarding nontraditional students were relative to the nontraditional African-American female students. Due to the researchers experience with nontraditional African-American female students, the correlation with the topics within the literature was very similar, but the absence of the African-American female context solidified the need for studies like this one. The selected topics of interest are directly associated with the impetus for espousing the aforementioned research questions.

The areas of review that were distinguished earlier as relevant are as follows: personal factors, professional (economic) factors, academic preparation, institutional support, financial resource, peer relationships, and professor relationships. Because the areas of review were the impetus for the research questions, they are presented in order of their relationship to the research questions throughout the literature review.

Personal Factors

Understanding the personal perceptions and needs of nontraditional students was important when trying to offer them the best possible matriculation. Quite often nontraditional students are affected by life’s circumstances long before they enter their respective institutions. Therefore, in order to understand their needs, it is imperative for institutions to have an understanding of the personal challenges that are effecting this
population of student. Often the personal challenges that they face are far beyond the
realm of the support services that are offered within postsecondary institutions.

Nontraditional students because of their ages have a myriad of issues that challenge their attainment of a quality postsecondary education. Therefore, understanding what they view to be their needs in addition to developing an understanding of the current body of literature relative to the personal lives of nontraditional students could quite possibly bridge the gap between the obstacles they face due to their personal lives and challenges they face during their degree attainment. Tinto (1993) states that maintaining the persistence of students often depends upon having an understanding of the student from a holistic vantage point and not just from an academic vantage point. Tinto asserts that it is imperative when trying to understand why students do not persist to look at the students overall relationships. Meaning, it is important to ask the student questions like, is the students a part of the social structure of the institution, or how involved with peers is the student? These questions are relative because, according to Tinto, students that are active participants within their institutions are more likely to persist than those that are not. He further asserts that those students that are engaged within institutions are more likely than not to be engaged externally as well. Therefore, if students become involved in campus activities it is more likely that they will experience a fuller life in their lives off campus.

Also, according to Johnson (2001), almost all African-American community college students have had some influence from their families as it relates to continuing their education. Most say that the impetus for their return to college has been most significantly affected by their mother figure. The understanding or the desire to
understand the necessity of education by the mothering figure for nontraditional students could definitely affect the esteem to which these students hold the attainment of a postsecondary education. There is strong evidence to suggest that children are greatly influenced by the academic achievements of their parents (Spreeter, 2006). African-American females report that having a mentor could also significantly decrease the amount of anxiety that they experience as it relates to entering a collegiate environment after being absent from one for a long period of time (Munford, 1996).

Stratton, O’toole, and Wetzel (2004) demonstrate in their study that students that get married and have children are more likely to experience an increase in financial responsibilities and thus are more likely to leave college without the completion of a degree, and also their previous decision to pursue a degree can quit significantly be altered.

Professional Factors

Preceding the 1990s, 50% of the nontraditional student population was motivated by professional development and promotion to increase their level of education. Today the number of nontraditional students that are motivated by career advancement to increase their levels of education has increased to over 85% (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006). They further state that society is moving in a direction where it is essential to have an education in order to attain a quality job and thus become a functioning and viable member of society. African-American women have recognized the need for them to attain a quality education, but are not matriculating at a rate that will ensure their success. Unfortunately for them, Freeman (2005) states that with limited education and subsequent lack of societal benefits, individuals will fail to gain wealth. Those that are
poor will be more likely to become poorer. These individuals will be limited to low skill jobs and will subsequently be considered, disposable workers.

Bowl (2001) discussed the relationship between educational access and attainment and career success. She explained how a rise in unemployment and the restructuring of industrial companies has forced workers to seek advanced education in order to skill themselves appropriately for future job opportunities. She further explained how the government is aware of the need of increasing educational access to the nontraditional student in order to ensure that they will continue to be viable contributors to society as a whole. As a result of the new requirement for the completion of postsecondary educations, Munford (1996) agrees that black women have not gained full access to professional positions and as a result are returning to colleges in high numbers. For two-year institutions the female population that is occupying their corridors is African-American women that are in their mid to late twenties. Two-year institutions often receive the women that are beginning to challenge themselves in regard to their careers and thus decide to revisit the thought of attaining a college degree. Berger (1994) adds that it is during their twenties that nontraditional students begin to make choices regarding what careers they really want to pursue and begin setting objectives in order to attain their desired goals. It is also during this stage that they begin to question their previous career decisions. At this stage they have a better understanding of themselves because they begin to assess the possibilities of furthering their careers and getting better access to financial gain through education. This period is seen as crucial because, according to Cross (1981), after the age of 30, most individuals like to be settled into
their careers and their desire to pursue an education declines steadily as their ages increase.

Academic Preparation

Tinto (2006) suggests that research abounds that giving students the opportunity to enter institutions of higher learning without the needed academic preparation does not truly give them the access they need in order to always be successful. He further asserts that academic preparation is a strong indicator as to whether a student will be able to persist. Adelman (1999) completed a study that followed students through their last two years of high school and into college. The students that were well prepared academically were found to be four times more likely to persist while those that were less prepared academically were only ten percent as likely to persist. Students that entered two-year institutions were only one third as likely to persist as those students that entered four-year institutions.

Kuh (2003) theorized that students that are engaged and involved in educationally productive activities and that develop habits of the mind and heart that engage their capacity for continual learning and personal development are more likely to persist. He further stated that emotional intelligence is also a predictor of academic success. According to Salovey and Mayer (1990), the reason that emotional intelligence was mentioned as a predictor of academic success is because emotions are considered to be organized responses that adaptively trigger the cognitive emotions and direct actions of students.

Epstein (2005) suggests that students that enroll in two-year institutions are considerably more likely to be poorly prepared academically. They are also more likely
to be first generation college students and verify their lack of strong academic influence. This fact is unfortunate because there is documented proof that there is a correlation between parental influence and involvement on a student’s academic outcome (Epstein, 2005). The majority of the studied participants have accounted for the fact that they did not have the parental influence and subsequently the academic preparation that they needed in order to excel academically. For the studied institution the average grade point average (GPA) is a staggering C minus (2.5) (NCES, 2003). Two-year institutions have become what some are calling remedial colleges because they are largely catering to students that are not well prepared academically from high school.

According to Kellogg, Huesman, and Radcliffe (2006), it is widely understood that students’ background/demographics and incoming academic ability (i.e. precollege measures) are important predictors of a student’s ability to persist to graduation. Tinto (2006) argues that it is important for institutions to help students address practical issues of persistence.

Purnell and Blank (2004) established in their study of community college students that because the student population that generally attends community colleges is less prepared academically for college, there should be measures instituted that accommodate this population of students such as study skills classes, tutorials, and so forth.

Tinto (2006) did a study that provided evidence that students that are not provided adequate academic preparation will not have the needed access to higher education. He further stated that those students that were seen as being academically prepared were four times more likely than their underprepared counterparts to enter college and seven times more likely to complete college once they entered. Tinto further stated that students are
much more likely to persist if they are in environments that expect them to succeed. A summary of his thoughts are that no one rises to low expectations. Thus, students are affected by what they perceive the institution thinks about their capacity to succeed.

Institutional Factors

Tinto (2006) states that there are five conditions that stand out as being supportive of and indicative of persistence at institutions and those are:

1. *Expectation*—meaning that if institutions expect highly of their students then their expectations will become a self-fulfilling prophecy because no one rises to low expectations.

2. *Advice*—students are more likely, according to Tinto, to persist in environments that offer clear and concise advice.

3. *Support*—students are more likely to persist in environments that offer academic, social, and personal support.

4. *Involvement*—students are more likely to persist in environment that offers their students a setting that involves them and conducts their institutions as if the students were valued members.

5. *Learning*—students are more likely to persist in environments that foster learning, because learning according to Tinto has always been the key to persistence. (p. 12)

Tinto further suggests that it is imperative that postsecondary institutions have a firm grasp of their student population. Studies also suggest that understanding the student population is not a concept that can be generalized across the body of institutions.
Thus, it is the responsibility of the individual institutions to conduct research on their student needs. The studied institution is a two-year community college that is mostly populated by nontraditional African-American female students. Therefore, it is imperative for the studied institution to study the institutional needs of nontraditional African-American female students, the largest population it serves.

Cain (1999) realized that nontraditional students are better served by community colleges. He argued that community colleges are better places for educating nontraditional students because according to him, community colleges have something for everyone. He further equated community colleges with Wal-Mart and stated that like Wal-Mart community colleges offer convenience, low prices, and good quality. Tinto (1998) further asserted that one of the most important factors for students that enter a community college is their ability to transition easily into the social culture of the institution that they are attending. Integrating students into the culture of the institution is supposedly linked to decreasing the attrition rates of nontraditional students. There is an alleged correlation between student involvement and degree completion. Thus, the thought is that it is important for the institution to institute programs of transition for persons that may have been out of the college environment for an extended amount of time.

Purell et al. (2002) further determined in a study that before students, particularly nontraditional students, can effectively begin their programs of study; they first have to have a command for the institutional environment. Campuses can be intimidating and daunting to students that are older and that have never been on a college campus before, or in a long period of time. The study suggests that students should be acclimated
especially to the practices and procedures relative to important practices such as enrollment, registration, and the procedures for applying for financial aid. It was also cited that students should be acclimated as to how they should perform accurate and consistent educational planning (Purrell et al., 2002). For that reason, it was cited in the study that students that are not acclimated appropriately to their campuses can become discombobulated and later decide that it is not worth their efforts to try and continue their educations and decide to drop out.

Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) were passionate about the fact that nontraditional students could be helped with their matriculation needs if there was more known about their developmental processes. They also agreed with the earlier argument that institutions of higher learning should take the charge to research the specific needs of nontraditional students. They asserted that the research should be done in an effort to ensure that the findings will be utilized accordingly. For instance, if the institutions find that there is a disconnect between faculty and nontraditional students, then training for faculty could be done to ensure that these students are learning as they should and that they are getting the most from their educational environments.

The desire for increased attrition rates should be the impetus for serious consideration of institutional factors that may impede student success. The empirical gaps in the research literature demand that more research be conducted providing answers to such critical questions relative to the attrition of African-American female students.
Financial Resources

The role of financial resources is pivotal in understanding the needs of nontraditional students. Students that are nontraditional are often not abreast of the financial vehicles that they can use in order to attend college. They are also likely to be employed by companies that may not be supportive to their employees attending college classes, especially financially (Munford, 1996). Bowl (2001) touched on the fact that many nontraditional students are having financial difficulties in attaining tuition and fees in order to support their higher education endeavors. Munford (1996) supports the notion that financial difficulties have a direct correlation with African-American women’s attainment of a postsecondary education when she stated that African-American women that return to college in contrast to their white counterparts are more likely to be in midlife, unmarried, single parents, and employed in low paying jobs. Thus, paying high tuition cost makes the attainment of a postsecondary education seem like a daunting and unlikely task for this population of student.

Also, financial vehicles like the Hope scholarship are quite often not available to nontraditional students because of many factors, namely they do not meet the required 1993 graduation year. The Hope scholarship is an academic scholarship that is given to Georgia residents and is based on a high school GPA that is 3.0 or better. However, the only Hope scholarships for nontraditional students specifies that it is for students that are seeking technical degrees, but students that enroll in the studied two-year institution are more likely to be from low-income families and are seeking associates degrees. Therefore, according to Cunningham (2002), the role of federal student loans is very important in ensuring access to students that may otherwise be financially disadvantaged.
Especially because there are an increasing amount of disadvantaged students that would like to pursue a college education, and should be afforded the same opportunities and college choice as all other populations of students. Cunningham speaks to the importance of public policy as it relates to access because in order to secure the future of higher education, the ability for those that are disadvantaged to be able to access postsecondary institutions is very important. She also spoke to the problem surrounding increases in tuition cost, stating that even though the cost of tuition is increasing, access could decline because the amount of grants and loans that students can receive are not increasing with the cost of tuition. Policy makers are looking at “choice” as a determinant when trying to gain an understanding of individual student need. Some policy makers, according to Cunningham (2002) are saying that the need portion of the financial need analysis should increase if a student chooses an institution that cost more than their need analysis specifies, all other factors remaining the same. The availability of financial aid that will meet the needs of the total cost for students that are from disadvantaged backgrounds is particularly relative to two-year institutions since, according to Cunningham (2000), at least 62% of all first time undergraduates attend two-year institutions; 75% of nontraditional students that are first time undergraduates are more likely to attend two-year institutions because of lower tuition.

Some argued that Clinton stated that the Pell grant should increase due to the increase in students that are deciding to pursue postsecondary educations that are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Duncan, 2003). Theses issues and others continue to have a tremendous impact on African-American female students. More than half of the student population that receives financial aid are independent students who are single parents and
minorities (Duncan, 2003). There has been a direct correlation between the patterns of dropout rates for minority students and the lack of financial assistance available to minorities, especially since the majority of minority students that attend community colleges are considered low income. Purnell et al. (2004) suggests that there is a disparity between economically advantaged students and those that are disadvantaged, and that those students that are viewed to be low income are less likely to persist than their more advantaged counterparts.

Peer Relationships

There appears to be consensus that institutions that foster positive relationships between their students are more likely than not to see lower levels of attrition (Tinto, 2006). Thus, the relationships that nontraditional students foster with their peers are very important in ensuring their collegiate success. Belcastro and Purslow (2006) suggest that peer relationships are at the forefront of collegiate success for the nontraditional student. According to the authors, relationships comprise the main pillar around which everything else is established and evolves. The process of integrating nontraditional students with their peers as stated by Tinto (1993) is intricate in trying to ensure that these students will persist. Tinto suggest that students that are socially integrated into their institutions are more likely than those that do not integrate to graduate. He proclaims that students are more likely to graduate in environments that offer personal and social support. For students, especially those that are in their first years of college, peer relationships are imperative to their successful matriculation. Tinto states that it is imperative to have the student feel as if they are the center of their collegiate lives and not the perimeter.
Many researchers found that there is in fact a correlation between the student’s engagement with their environment in academic settings and their educational outcomes. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) agreed that the absence of significant interactions with other college students was the single leading predictor of attrition. They felt that the student’s interactions must go beyond the classroom in order for the students to feel integrated. They also believed that in order for minority students to persist that integration was an important part of their retention.

Kuh (2003) researched the relationship between student engagement and persistence and believes that engaged students are involved in educationally productive activities, and that those activities would prepare them for continued learning and personal development. Demaris and Kritsonis (2006) discussed that one of the precursors for African-American students to persist is to ensure that the students find a sense of belonging within their institutions.

Additionally, Cropper (2000) felt that students that are connected with a mentor are more likely than not to persist, particularly nontraditional African-American students. He argues that allowing a student to have a mentor would ease some of the tension of being a nontraditional student. He further offers a historical context for mentorship, and stated that mentoring is grounded in African-American culture. African-American mentoring can be traced back several centuries to Africa. Thus, educationally African-Americans were thought to learn better and become acclimated easier through the use of mentors. Cropper (2000) further asserts that because the failure rates for African-Americans in higher education is great, the use of mentors that are in similar fields of study and in some instances from similar environments, and that have
experienced similar challenges can be effective sources to students such as nontraditional students. The idea behind this particular type of mentor is that if the student is experiencing some difficulties within the institution, then the mentor would have most likely encountered a similar challenge and be able to decipher an effective strategy for helping the student to meet the challenge.

Professor Relationships

The most significant reason that students attend institutions of higher education is to further their educations. Thus, one of the most important relationships to be fostered for the student is the relationship between the student and their professors. Therefore, according to Hofinger (1995), it is the responsibility of the professor to ensure the success of nontraditional students by taking additional steps to ensure their success. The steps are significant because they give credence to the benefit of understanding the plight of the nontraditional student and respecting that population as a unique and separate student entity. Those steps are as follows:

1. *Determine the climate or make up of the group in the classroom*—that means determining what the intellectual and purpose driven makeup of the students in the class happens to be.

2. *Clarify the purpose of the individuals in the classroom*—that means helping the students with their learning processes and getting a better understanding of the students’ needs and goals within this population of student.

3. *Strengthen the desire of each student to implement her specific purpose.*

   This step is crucial to the nontraditional student because it helps the student
to become more proactive about their educations, and helps them to grasp exactly what the reason is that they are trying to attain a postsecondary education.

4. *Point out the wide range of resources available.* Often times students, particularly nontraditional students do not know the resources that are available to them to assist them in their successful matriculation.

5. *Be a flexible source to be utilized by the students.* This means having the professor or instructor open themselves up to receive and try to help with the challenges that the nontraditional students might face.

6. *Respond to the needs of nontraditional students.* Nontraditional students are quite often vastly different in their perspectives about their educations than more traditional students. Thus, this step is imperative because they will enter the classroom with a unique set of challenges that quite often are opposing to the challenges of the more traditional student.

7. *Become a participant learner, a member of the group.* Nontraditional students are found to function best in environments where they are comfortable. Thus, developing a friendly student teacher relationship is imperative. Professors that do this understand that nontraditional students can add to the flavor of their teaching environments because they can add to their lectures using personal and often very pertinent examples.

8. *Not tell students what he thinks they ought to know.* Teaching from a pedagogical style that does not allow forward thinking is not the best means of teaching nontraditional students that are used to being able to formulate
their own thought processes is not the answer when teaching this group of students.

9. **Recognize the changes that have been made in course policies to meet the need of the nontraditional student.** For example, many of the course policies and procedure sometimes have to be altered when instructing nontraditional students. Being rigid would not provide the best possible environment for nontraditional students.

10. **Be able to recognize and accept his limitations.** That means that if you do not know the answers right away then say that you are unsure, but that you will find out the answer. (Hofinger et al., 1995)

The aforementioned steps in understanding and teaching the nontraditional student were positive because they were void of bias, inclusive, and forward thinking. Hofinger et al. (1995) offered an account of steps that could very easily be used across the body of nontraditional students.

Furthermore, there is literature that suggests that if faculty is specifically prepared for the adult learner then they will aid in the adult learner’s successful matriculation. For instance, the use of in depth faculty development was suggested by Kuhn and Frey (1999). In their account they suggest that having faculty follow an intense faculty development and then having them participate in a step by step analysis of what they have learned could contribute to the academic success of nontraditional students. Those steps are:

1. **Reaction**—Learner satisfaction usually measured with evaluation sheets at the end of training sessions.
2. Learning—The change in knowledge, skills, or attitude achieved in a training session.

3. Behavior—The change in behavior or application of learning resulting from participation in a training program.

4. Results—The final results or benefit or application of learning resulting from participation in a training program. (Kuhn & Frey, 1999)

It is unfortunate however that some professors have preconceived notions regarding students that attend two-year institutions, and of students that are nontraditional. Brown (2000) argues that students are products of their learning environments and that it is a critical role of the teacher to foster a positive learning environment which causes adults to feel accepted as part of their academic experience. Kuhn and Frey (1999) further stated that nontraditional students need to be in learning environments that are structured for adult learners. For instance, instructional delivery is very important when lecturing to nontraditional students. Cantor (1992) concurred and wrote that “research indicates that when high frequency or more common words are used, learning is faster and retention is longer” (p. 3). Another suggestion to improve instruction is the use of a faculty consultant. According to Heppner and Johnston (1994), having peer feedback for faculty is an excellent way of ensuring more efficient instruction and subsequently better student outcome. Sessenbaugh (1995) noted that students perceive the following as indication that their professors are effective:

1. Organizational stability—answers questions clearly and concisely, explains guidelines and points out of what is important in each lesson;

2. Instructional adaptability—shows interest in student opinions) and;
3. **Interpersonal flexibility**—does not put students down or interrupt them.

(Heppner & Johnston, 1994)

Sadly, there is an underlying problem that some students in two-year institutions face and that is that the professors that are instructing these students come into the classroom with a set of preconceived ideals about the level of performance for this population of students. The student faculty interaction is profound because, according to Kuh and Hu (2001), the interactions between faculty and students are strong indicators of student success and satisfaction. There is increasing evidence that the established theories and practices that are used in advising students are problematic because they are based on the experiences of traditional students (Spreter, 2006). Ness (2003) states that faculty should find more time to spend with students because of the student friendly mission that two-year institutions are supposed to uphold.

Conversely, according to Nicholson and Bess (1997), there has been very little research done on the educational needs and learning styles of nontraditional students. Yet, policy makers have recognized the increase in nontraditional students, particularly African-American female students and other minority female students. Also, Nicholson and Bess (1997) suggest that there has been evidence that nontraditional students may have different learning styles than more traditional students and that their learning styles should be taken into consideration when trying to determine the best methods of instruction. Therefore, in order to increase the likelihood of the success among African-American female nontraditional student’s professors should take into account the fact that there has been evidence that the curricular needs and the pedagogic style that
nontraditional students respond to are different than traditional students and should be considered throughout curriculum design (Nicholson & Bess, 1997).

Also, Astin (1993) espouses that students are far more likely to graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institutions. There is a correlation between the relationships that are fostered with faculty and staff and the student’s feelings of cohesiveness within the institution. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) argue that because nontraditional students encounter a unique set of circumstances in and out of the classroom environment and that they should be taught through the lens of holistic understanding and that professors should cater their teaching styles to include this population of student.

Researchers are devoting more time to understanding the learning styles of adult learners. Some researchers have done studies that are specific to the nontraditional female student. Hayes (2000) in her research examined how the environment as well as faculty interactions and curriculum affected the non traditional learner. She learned that teaching styles and text books that are more male centered can in fact impede the educational outcomes of nontraditional female students.

Summary

The purpose of the literature review was to garner an understanding of the literature that is specific to nontraditional students. There were topics of interest specific to the research questions that were specifically studied throughout the literature review. The purpose of the literature review was also to garner an understanding of what other researchers have found to be the most pertinent challenges and concerns that
nontraditional students face, and to understand the possible voids in the available literature.
CHAPTER III
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study considered nontraditional African-American female student's perceptions of how their personal, professional, academic preparation, institutional support, financial resource perceptions, peer relationships, and professor relationships have affected their attrition rates. The theoretical understanding for this study perceives that there are a plethora of factors inside and outside of the institution that are directly correlated with why nontraditional African-American female's students fail to persist and are known to contribute to high attrition rates in two-year institutions. The hope is that an understanding of those factors could assist in aiding nontraditional African-American female students in persisting.

For the purposes of this study, a combination of Tinto’s (1993) student persistence theory in qualitative research and black feminist theory was utilized. Tinto’s student persistence theory speaks to the relevance of the interaction between the student’s behavior and their perceptions relative to their integration into social and academic environments. This theoretical perspective was used because of its relationship in determining student needs in college persistence. Tinto understood in his research that students are holistic beings and that having an understanding of their entire spectrum of needs would most likely contribute to, if not ensure their persistence.
According to Tinto (1993), there is a direct correlation between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. He further stated that involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. Thus, the use of Tinto's model will hopefully yield an insight into the perceptions of the participants as it relates to their understandings of why they have not persisted in the past.

Historically, African-American women have been great contributors to society and to education. The contributions that African-American females would make to higher education were made apparent when the first African-American female graduated from an institution of higher education in the mid-19th century (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Therefore, how is it that in 2008 their educational needs are still unmet. Why is it that in an institution that consistently enrolls African-American female students, these students are being met with senseless challenges? In black feminist theory the idea is to ascertain the causes behind the inequality associated with the African-American female. The relevance of the black feminist theory is to also give the African-American female a voice and allow her to discuss her needs without society's skewed lens.

Assumptions

The use of black feminist theory was thought to be the best possible theory for trying to garner an understanding as to why African-American female students are having such intense challenges graduating from postsecondary institutions. Using the black feminist theory showed the importance of an African-American woman contributing to
the body of research for African-American women. The use of black feminist theory gave the researcher a lens that is inclusive of the studied population. In qualitative research, “it is important to make certain that those that are researched influence the development of the methods and methodology. Their voices lend credibility to the final product” (Carter, 2003, p. 1). For the purposes of this study who better to study the phenomenon of a particular group than someone that has the trust of the group, shares the same demographic, and is committed to making a contribution to higher education research and more importantly improving institutional practices and policies that negatively impact student success.

The use of the black feminist theory is important to this particular study because it views the African-American female from a holistic vantage point and offers her a voice. She has in the past and in present been seen as a conglomerate of things that were not determined by her. Society sees her as black, female, a mother, a social class, a religion, an intellect, an age, a sexual orientation, and much more. Her experiences in life, particularly in an institution such as the studied institution, will most likely never fit into what Patricia Collins (1999) refers to as the Euro-centric norm. However, this study hoped to offer her the opportunity to set the tone for who she is and what her expectations are for her education, because there have not been a myriad of opportunities where she has been asked what her specific needs are.

The use of the black feminist theory is also important because historically African-American females have been marginalized. It has been the standard in this country to view her voice as inaudible. Thus, it was the intent of this study to give the African-American female student an opportunity through the use of this study to speak up
about the marginalization that she has been experiencing relative to her education and garner an understanding as to why her attrition rates have been affected adversely.

Therefore, offering an understanding of how all of the aforementioned factors can work together during her attainment of a quality education is the basis for this study. This study hoped to show just how much is involved in the attainment of a postsecondary matriculation for the African-American nontraditional female student, and to convey why adequate institutional adjustments and holistic understanding of the African-American female’s plight is imperative when trying to accommodate her educational needs.

The studied institution for varying reasons attracts nontraditional African-American females, and the black feminist theory was utilized as a theoretical framework because it was one of the best suited frameworks for a study of this nature. Also, According to Collins (1999), a black feminist researcher and writer, when groups that have similar biographies are brought together they are able to validate each other’s experiences through the development of a shared culture. This study hoped to afford this group of students the opportunity to develop a well defined culture amidst an already developed culture, through the use of a focus group. The focus group served as a venue where these women could express themselves by beginning to discuss their perceptions of why they have not been successful in the past, and hopefully garners some understanding of how a more successful matriculation for them is possible. Hopefully the participants will foster positive relationships and their growing relationships will develop into a peer support network.

The basis for this study was also to gain an understanding of the perceptions of nontraditional students as to why they do not persist. The study examined the
participant’s lives from various angles and got an understanding of the factors that they perceived affected their attrition rates in the past and the factors that they perceive could affect their attrition rates in the future. The factors that the study examined are: the personal, professional, academic preparation, institutional support, financial resources perceptions, peer relationships, and professor relationships that the nontraditional students that were studied have towards their attrition rates. The conceptual framework for the study was based on the idea that the aforementioned factors in someway have an affect on the attrition rates of nontraditional African-American females.

Summary

It was thought that the best possible conceptual framework for understanding the perceptions of nontraditional students would be to use a combination of Tinto’s (1993) theory of persistence and black feminist theory utilizing a few authors for support. Tinto’s theory offered a holistic understanding of the varying needs of students regarding persistence, while black feminist theory offered a more insightful look at understanding the specific needs of African-American female students as holistic beings and then as students. The premise for using black feminist theory was to garner an insight in to the lives of the African-American female student through their own race and gender-specific experience.

Definition of Terms

Academic preparation: The academic preparation that students received in the institutions that they attended prior to attending the studied institution, including secondary and postsecondary programs.
African-American: All references to black American women born in the United States, excluding Caribbean, African, and other women throughout the Diasporas.

Attrition rates: The reduction in a school's student population as a result of transfer or dropout.

Financial resources: All factors that relate to the relationship between financial resources available to African-American nontraditional female students and their attrition rates.

Inclusion: The student's perception as to whether or not they are included in the overall workings of the institution.

Institutional support: All factors that support or inhibit the degree attainment for nontraditional students in the institution of study.

Nontraditional students: Students that are not entering institutions of higher education immediately following high school and that are over the age of 25 could have children and be married, and that work 20 or more hours per week.

Peer classroom relationships: All factors that are related to the relationships that are experienced with fellow classmates inside and outside of the classroom.

Personal factors—For the purpose of this study, these factors are related to marital status, number of dependents, influence of friendships, and self-confidence.

Professional factors: For the purposes of this study, all professional factors will be recognized as the average number of hours worked weekly.

Professor relationships: All factors that are related to the involvement between the nontraditional student and the professors that they encounter.
*Traditional students:* Students that are entering postsecondary institutions immediately following high school and are generally between the ages of 18 and 22 during their college matriculations.

![Diagram](image-url)

*Figure 1. Relationship of Terms*
Scope of Limitations

The following may be limitations while conducting the research.

1. The research is limited to African-American females that are between the ages of 25-40.

2. The participants in this research project were from one institution in Atlanta.

3. The participants may not be honest due to fear of institutional repercussions.

4. The studied population cannot be generalized to the entire population of African-American female two-year college students.

5. There was only a small sampling of the overall population of nontraditional students at the studied institution.

Summary

The aforementioned theoretical framework hopes to show that there is some interplay between the outside forces that face nontraditional students and their contributions to the increasing attrition rates in two-year colleges. Tintos (2006) theory is relative because it shows that there is a correlation between the persistence of African-American female nontraditional students, their feeling of inclusion, and their level of involvement in the activities and workings of their institution. However, Patricia Collins (1998) emphasizes that there is a relationship between the demographic makeup and the social makeup of an African-American female’s life. The writer argues that the interplay of the two affects their ability or inability to continue their postsecondary education. The theoretical framework that is espoused for this study used a combination of both Tinto’s theory of persistence and the black feminist theory. Both theories were felt to be the best
possible theoretical frameworks to be used in order to try and gain an understanding of
the causes of the high attrition rates for African-American female students.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Design of the Study

The study was conducted using the qualitative method of research. This method of research was identified as the best possible means of researching for this particular topic because it allowed the researcher to fully capture the perceptions of participants, and it afforded the participants an open forum in order to discuss pertinent information as it relates to their collegiate experiences. The use of the qualitative methods also allowed the data to emerge and allowed the participants to give a first person account of their experiences.

Qualitative research afforded the researcher the ability to use interviews as a means of understanding participant perceptions and through the interviews the researcher gained an insight into what nontraditional American-American female students feel are the impediments to their collegiate success. It was the intent of the study to get in depth looks into the lives of the participants and truly get a feel for what they perceive has been the cause of their high attrition rates. The use of qualitative research for this study afforded the participants a means of sharing with the researcher their deep thoughts and feelings without the feeling that they will have to suffer any repercussions.

Qualitative research also benefited the researcher because it allowed the researcher to be free and probe responses that seem interesting to the outcomes of the
study, thus the relevance of using a semistructured interview format. Also, the use of focus groups was included to give the participants a forum of their peers where they could feel comfortable enough to offer insight into the true issues that face a nontraditional student in an environment that was non-threatening. This participant group was comfortable enough to express their understandings of the circumstances that have led to their high attrition rates, because of their similar demographic profiles. It was also the intent of the researcher to gain through the use of the focus group a more stimulated dialogue than what could transpire during the one on one interviewing process.

Goldman (1962) stated that focus groups can:
1. Stimulate thoughts in other respondents
2. Cause other respondents to view things differently
3. Stimulate greater depth of discussion
4. Remind individuals of things they may have forgotten or
5. Help other respondents verbalize their thoughts and opinions.

Goldman further states that focus groups allow the participants a spontaneity that they may not have had otherwise because it is unlikely that the participants will make up answers to questions in the company of their peers.

Description of the Setting

The research was conducted in an urban college that is located in the heart of Atlanta. The student population was comprised of American-American nontraditional female students. The studied institution was comprised of students that are from varying
backgrounds, but the majority population of students was American-American female students that were on average 27 and in most instances work full time. The campus was a nonresidential campus, and most of the students were first generation college students. Also, most of the students received some form of financial aid in order to cover the cost of their attendance.

Participant Selection

The participants were selected from a single two-year institution and were American-American females, between the ages of 25 and 40 and most worked at least 20 hours per week. They are currently enrolled in the studied institution. The selected participants were students that have left the studied institution and have been absent from the institution for at least two consecutive semesters. The students were chosen from a series of classes. The students in the classes were given a brief questionnaire in order to determine the best participants for the study.

There were 15 participants selected. That number was selected in an effort to compensate for the possibility of students withdrawing from the participant pool, and to ensure that the researcher would have a minimum of ten participants. After the students were qualified to participate, they were asked to set a time and were interviewed individually, and asked to participate in a short focus group. The interviews and focus group were held during the fall 2007 semester. The 10 selected students were given a schedule with an allotment of time from which to choose, and were interviewed accordingly. They were also given a small allotment of dates for conducting the focus group and asked to select a conducive date and time. After the participants selected a date and time they were notified and their attendance was requested. They were
informed that a light reception would take place following the focus group. Before the focus group and interviews were conducted the participants were given two forms to complete regarding their participation, a human subjects form and an agreement to participate form. They were also informed of the details of their participation and what was expected of them during the study. They were informed that their participation in this study was strictly voluntary and if at any time they choose to no longer participate, then they could do so at that time.

Description of Interview Instrument

The instrument that was used for this study was a semistructured interview format. The questions within the body of the interview instrument were open ended due to the nature of qualitative research; open ended questions were seen as the best fit. The instrument used for the focus group was in the same interview format. However, the questions were similar but more detailed dependent upon the information that was received from the initial interview. The initial interview questions were divided by dominant themes. Those themes were derived from the research questions and are: personal factors, professional factors, academic preparedness, institutional support, financial resources, peer relationships, and professor relationships.

Data Collection Procedures

The collection of data was done in a three step process through the use of an initial questionnaire, a one-on-one interview, and a participant centered focus group. In an effort to complete the initial questionnaire to determine participants, professors were asked to identify students in their classrooms that could possibly fit the criteria of the
study. Those students were given a survey to complete and after they completed that survey, those individuals that met the criteria were asked to participate in the study. During the initial one on one interview, the participants were each given a packet to complete that included; a reason for the study letter, a letter formally asking for their participation, and a letter that explained their confidentiality rights, and its relevance to student participants/human subjects.

The core of the data was collected from the participants primarily using one on one interview, and a single participant centered focus group. The focus group was held at a location away from the studied institution. The participants were notified of the preliminary dates and locations for the focus group during the individual interviews. During that time they were given a variety of dates from which to choose and after the last interview the date that was selected by the most participants was chosen. After the participants completed the interview and focus group the participants that required clarity on certain statements were asked questions regarding their responses in order to ensure clarity and negate researcher bias.

The purpose of using the face to face interview method for this study was to try and grasp a true understanding of the plight of the American-American female nontraditional students and to try and get a nonabrasive look into their lives. The interviews were structured in such a way as to hopefully gain a true understanding of participant’s perceptions regarding institutions of higher learning. The researcher’s positive relationship with the participants garnered a significant rapport and lead to some positive insights into the studied phenomena. As Creswell (2007) states, the face-to-face
interview afforded the researcher the capability of gaining access to information or a particular phenomenon that may not have otherwise been assessable.

The additional use of the focus group was to give the study participants the opportunity to have an open forum where their feelings could be discussed and where they could be among other women that may share a similar demographic and perspective. Hopefully, they gained a better understanding of the issues that impeded the academic progress of other participants, and have learned from each other the necessary formula for matriculating successfully. Hopefully, they will pass what they have learned while participating in this study on to future nontraditional American-American female students.

The students were interviewed at their convenience, but in order to keep a sufficient timeline of completion those that agree to participate were given an allotment of time from which to choose a time slot to be interviewed, and all participants were able to decide upon an allotment of time that was convenient for them. The face-to-face on campus interviews truly captured the true essence of the campus environment in the interview experience, and allowed the participants to express the challenges that they were experiencing while they were still on campus and the ideas were fresh.

The interviews were taped and moderately transcribed while the interviews were taking place. Notes were also taken during the interviews in an effort to record such things as participant non-verbal behaviors, gestures, and facial expressions. Extensive transcription was done by the researcher directly following the interview sessions, and whenever time permitted between interviews. The focus group transcripts were transcribed immediately following the group.
Human Subjects Review

Those persons that were selected to participate in the study were given the interview protocol and were given an in-depth understanding of the significance of their participation and how their information would be used and disseminated. In order to ensure the safety of all parties involved in the study, the participants were asked to sign a consent form. On that form was the purpose of the study, the benefits of their participation, the researcher’s contact information, and a confidentiality statement. The participants were all informed in the consent agreement of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis was done using the typological method of data analysis. This method was deemed as the best means of data analysis for this study because the study was designed to capture the thoughts and perceptions of the participants surrounding a particular set of typological factors. Those typologies were generated with an understanding that they could in fact be contributing factors to the perceptions of the high attrition rates of American-American female students. The data were analyzed using Hatch’s method. Hatch (2002) described the steps of a typological analysis as:

1. Identify the typologies to be identified;
2. Read the data, marking entries related to your typologies;
3. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary sheet;
4. Look for patterns, relationships, themes within typologies;
5. Read data. Coding entries according patterns identified and keeping record of what entries go with which elements of your patterns;

6. Decide if your patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for examples of your patterns;

7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified;

8. Write your patterns as one sentence generalizations and

9. Select data excerpts that support your generalizations. (p.153)

The interview questions were left open-ended in order to try and gather the best possible data. The interview questions were directly relative to the research questions, and the common themes were identified in the interviews and questionnaires, and were organized according to their relevance to the dominant typologies that were espoused in the research questions. The data were then coded using the emergent themes throughout the interview and focus group data. The emergent sub themes were coded within the dominant themes.

Data Validity and Trustworthiness

The data were checked for credibility through the use of triangulation. Triangulation as described by Creswell (2004) is the process of using multiple sources in order to provide corroborating evidence. The use of varying methods of data collection is done in order to ensure the validity of the proposed research. Triangulation was executed through the use of participant interviews, a participant focus group, and member checking. Member checking is the process of allowing the participants to review the findings of the proposed research in order to ensure the researcher’s understandings.
Summary

The use of qualitative research lends a more participant centered look into varying phenomenon. The qualitative method of research allows the researcher to fully capture the perceptions of the participants through their unique perspective. It also allows the use of an open forum where the participants are more open to expressive dialogue. It further allows for an open dialogue between the participants and the researcher during interviews and an open interplay of dialogue between the participants during focus groups.
CHAPTER V

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The data collection process took place during the entire fall 2007 semester. There were 10 students selected from a qualifying survey (see Appendix A) that initially qualified 15 students as eligible to participate. Ten students were contacted and asked to participate. Of the 10 original selected participants, one student was replaced with an alternate that was selected during the original qualifying survey. The participant was replaced due to an extreme family emergency and subsequent death in her family.

After the students were contacted, they scheduled times that were convenient for their schedules to interview. However, due to scheduling conflicts, several of the participants had to reschedule, some more than once. After the scheduling conflicts were worked out, each student participated in a lengthy one on one interview, and later a focus group. The interviews were conducted at the student’s convenience and were typically completed after hours on campus. During the interviews the participants were informed of the need for their participation in a focus group as a part of the participation process. The participants all agreed and signed a participant agreement form (Appendix B). The participants were told that they would receive notice of the time and date for the focus group at a later date. After the interviews were completed, all of the participants were given an invitation to what was referred to as a focus group/luncheon and were asked to respond. The invitation indicated the date, time, and location of the focus group. The
focus group took place at the end of the fall 2007 semester, and was held off campus. On the day of the focus group, only five of the participants had solidified their presence at the focus group, and the expectation was that only those five would be participating. Especially since the weather was inclement. However, when it was the actual time for the focus group to begin, eight of the participants were present. One called and expressed her regret due to work obligations, and the final participant was unable to be reached due to a change in her living circumstances.

The participants were welcomed and thanked for their participation. The focus group began with a small lunch and during that time the participants were observed talking among themselves. The participants seemed very comfortable with each other, and their personalities seemed to gel very well. The purpose of the use of the interviews and focus group was to get an understanding of the perceptions of nontraditional African-American female students about the factors that contribute to their lack of persistence, and contribution to the attrition rates of two year colleges. The following data are representative of the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, of the nontraditional African-American women studied. The majority of the participants that were interviewed had been affected in varying manners by varying issues that disrupted their collegiate matriculation and spoke freely of their perceptions, needs, feelings, and desires as it related to their needs for a successful matriculation. The interview and focus group questions were divided by themes and based on their relationship to the research questions. The purpose of utilizing these particular research questions was to gain insight and a holistic understanding of what factors the participants believe contribute to their past and possible future inability to persist.
Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a relationship between perceived personal factors and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American females?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between perceived professional factors and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between perceived academic preparation and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ4: Is there a relationship between perceived institutional support services and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ5: Is there a relationship between perceived financial resources and attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students?

RQ6: How do nontraditional African-American students describe their relationships with their peers as it relates to their feelings of inclusion in the overall academic and social environment at a two-year institution?

RQ7: How do nontraditional African-American students describe their relationships with their professors as it relates to their feelings of inclusion in the overall academic environment at a two-year institution?

The categorization of the data was done utilizing seven areas of focus that were relative to the research questions. The interview questions were organized based on those areas of focus. Those categories are: perceptions of personal, professional, academic, institutional, financial resources, peer relationships, and professor relationships factors.

The actual interview protocol and focus group questions can be found in Appendix C and
Appendix D, respectively. Both the interviews and the focus group were semistructured. The use of a semistructured format was utilized in an effort to allow for a free flowing dialogue among the participants.

The development of coding was done using the aforementioned themes. There were sub-themes that emerged within the dominant themes. The participants were asked to respond to several questions that were relative to each of the dominant themes. The participants were asked to respond to nine questions under personal perceptions, six questions under professional perceptions, nine questions under academic preparation perceptions, four questions under institutional support perceptions, six questions under perceived affect of financial resources, five questions under peer relationship perceptions, and six questions under perceived affect of professor relationship.

The use of the individual interview and focus group data was used in an effort to express the importance of using the raw data to show the true perceptions and feelings from the participants in their own words. Collins (1999) stated that African-American females do not get the opportunity to lift their voices and define who they are. By using the raw data the researcher hoped to allow the true voices of the participants to be heard. The use of the raw data was thought to be the best practice because who better to express the feelings and perceptions of the participants, than the actual participants. Excerpts from the raw data are presented in order of the dominant themes and follow the layout of the interview questions. The emergent themes are represented directly following their dominant theme affiliation. The data presented is relative to the one-on-one interview sessions and are presented in collaboration with the focus group data. This was done in an effort to show that the data that were received from the initial interviews was only
enriched by the data from the focus group, and thus there is no need to separate the two data sets.

The qualifying interview information is presented first in order to give life to the participants and support the relevance of obtaining their demographic information for this study. The use of the qualifying data also functions as the foundation for the data that are presented in further text.

The Qualifying Survey

The utilization of the qualifying survey was significant because the data from the qualifying survey showed the distinct variations and similarities in the participants. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 46. There were 6 out of the 10 that were mothers and there was only 1 that had been consistently married during the lives of her children. There were two that were divorced and the remaining three were always single mothers. The only almost universal commonality was the fact that the majority of the participants worked on average 40 hours per week, and some significantly more. Another almost universal commonality was that 7 of the 10 spent at least 5 or more years out of the studied institution before returning, the others no less than 1 year. The overwhelming and unfortunate fact was that out of the 10 participants 4 of them at some point were not planning on returning to complete their degrees.

An additional fact was that a staggering 8 of the 10 expressed that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared academically for college, 1 was unsure due to the time gap, and only 1 participant felt that she was adequately academically prepared. They cited various reasons for leaving the institution at one point, but most attributed
their leaving to unfortunate life circumstances. For the participants the attainment of a college degree has been a very difficult and arduous journey and some are still unsure as to whether they are capable of meeting the challenge (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Qualifying Survey/Demographic Information: Participants Personal Data (At the Time of Initial Survey)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Expectation of Return</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Good?</th>
<th>Time out of Preparation</th>
<th>Academic Hours</th>
<th>No. of Hours</th>
<th>Worked Per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>26+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Co-habitating</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>No, dropped out</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aforementioned facts are significant because they bring to the forefront some of the challenges that the participants face and set the foundation for the presentation of the interview and focus group data. The following gives a more in-depth account of the reasons why the participants decided to leave the studied institution before they completed their degrees. A presentation of the data follows through the utilization of the interview and the focus group data, collectively.

Presentation of Data

*Perceptions of the Two-Year College Experience for the African-American Female Nontraditional Student*

In this study, the purpose was to identify the participant’s perceived factors that have contributed to the attrition rates at a two year college. The seven variables that were believed to have an effect are: personal, professional, academic preparedness, institutional support, financial resource, peer relationships, and professor relationships. These variables appear to be interwoven into the experiences of African-American nontraditional female college students. It was thought that it is impossible to disassociate one aspect of the participant’s life experiences from the other. However, in studying the needs of African-American female nontraditional students the espoused variables are not always viewed as needing to be collectively addressed within the studied institutions. The institution seems to view the external lives of the participants as possibly being separate from their experience as a student.

There were two theories that seemed most relative to understanding the needs of nontraditional African-American female nontraditional students and those were the black
feminist theory and Tinto's (2002) theory of persistence in institutions of higher education. Thus, throughout the body of the data presentation chapter those two theories are referenced.

The use of black feminist theory was important within this study because it solidifies the fact that nontraditional African-American female students account for large percentages of the population of students within institutions of higher education, but their specific needs are not being taken into account. The basic premise behind black feminist theory in this context is to express the urgency of giving nontraditional African-American students a voice because currently their presence is there, but institutions have not been historically responsive to them educationally as they have been to their counterparts. The use of this theory is also significant because often times when African-American women, and in this context nontraditional college students raise their voices, it is not always in protest, but in a desire for universal equality and in this sense a quality postsecondary educations for all nontraditional students and subsequently educational understanding for all women and students that will face the challenges they face. As Collins (1993) expressed, African-American women raise their voices in support of the masses. They are not merely interested in the suffrage of their unique community. Black feminist theory was initiated in the past because African-American women have been marginalized historically in all of their endeavors to be considered as equals. Unfortunately, the use of this theory was important within the context of this study because it was found that they have been marginalized educationally as well.

The use of Tinto's (2002) theory of persistence is that he espoused that there is a correlation between the attainment of a degree and the level of engagement of the
students within the institution. His theory was relative to the nontraditional African-American female student because historically within this institution they have not been holistically engaged within the entire collegiate experience. Thus, his theory was important to this study because one of the challenges of the study was to clarify their perceptions as to the reasons behind their lack of engagement.

The following data presentation hopes to garner a more insightful look into the perceptions of African-American female students regarding their attrition rate contributions. The data are presented in order of the dominant themes that were espoused from the research questions followed by the sub-themes that emerged from the body of research.

Dominant Themes

*Personal Factors*

The majority of the participants agreed that they were experiencing and had experienced challenges in the past in relation to their personal lives, and that their personal lives at some point had significantly contributed to their lack of persistence within the studied college. The participant's views on their personal lives solidified that continued plight of the black woman to be heard and to finally have something for themselves. Hooks (1981) talks about how the needs of the black woman have always been mute within the greater society and within their personal lives. The instances of the studied participants were no different. A few of the participants affirmed that because of the challenges that they experienced they were uncertain at varying points as to whether or not they would return to college to complete their degree programs. The participants cited a multitude of personal challenges that they experienced in the past that contributed
to their lack of persistence, and their experiences ranged from the seemingly simple to the sadly disheartening.

The interviews started slowly under the dominant theme of personal perceptions with questions ranging from asking participants about their social lives to asking questions about their goals and aspirations. The goal of this particular line of questioning was to gain insight into the personal lives of the participants and determine how their personal lives had significantly affected their reasoning for discontinuing their collegiate matriculation at one point or another. The following themes emerged: (a) lack of social interactions, (b) lack of spousal support, (c) lack of family support, (d) lack of personal focus, and (e) lack of coworker support (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Personal Factors Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Lack of social interactions</th>
<th>Lack of spousal support</th>
<th>Lack of family support</th>
<th>Lack of personal focus</th>
<th>Lack of coworker support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>*</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* An asterisk is placed under each sub-theme dependent upon their relevance to the participant.

**Emergent Themes**

**Lack of Social Life/Social Life Related Issues**

According to Psychologist Dr. Abraham Maslow (1943), having one’s social needs met are second only to having ones physiological and security needs met. Maslow reasoned that having a sense of belonging, love and affection were essential components to human survival. Thus, it was not surprising when the majority of the participants seemed to be disheartened by the fact that they were not experiencing quality social interactions. They expressed despair with the fact that they were not having what they felt to be a life outside of the collegiate and family life experiences. Most of the women surprisingly thought of social life as expressly having to do with dating. The majority stated that they did not have the time that was necessary to have a quality social life. Some of the participants conveyed the idea that they were comfortable with their lack of a social life, but through action or further statements they would later prove that they were indeed bothered and heavily affected by the deficiency in that area of their lives.
For those participants that were involved in healthy and active social lives, they seemed to be more stable and better adjusted to being a student. Participant #1 was an exemplary example of the affects of an inadequate social life, and how the participants feel that having a social life is a priority for them.

For instance, participant #1 was adamant throughout the interview and the focus group that she has on several occasions questioned herself and still questions herself regarding the completion of her degree. Strangely, she is also the one that made one of the more intriguing comments as it relates to her social life. When asked the question what does her social life look like on an average week? She mentioned that it sometimes consisted of time spent with girlfriends, and that school was her first priority. However, when she was later asked how she ranked school on her list of priorities, her answer was that she ranked school second and that her first priority was to get married. She stated: The completion of school would probably be second. Getting married would be first. I know that sounds strange since I’m not seeing anyone, but I just like the family unit. That’s not something that I dwell on, but it is a top priority. It just makes life a lot easier, but since I’m not engaged or anything college right now is perfect.

The comment was significant because it gave the impression that if she was at some point able to marry again, then she would forgo the completion of her education to do so. This comment alone shows the weight and significance that some students, especially nontraditional students place on marriage and dating. The sentiment of not having a social life was a uniform source of angst for the participants. Participant #2 made it apparent in her dialogue that she too was having social life issues and that those
issues were causing her to feel isolated and stressed. Unlike participant #1, participant #2 was having residual affects of a previous relationship. She discussed issues from a former marriage that were presently causing her problems. Her ex-husband was continuously manipulating her and causing issues for her, specifically mental issues. Through his antics with delaying child support and other financial support for her and her children, he was causing great stress. She was constantly faced with the challenge of finance with him and whether or not she would be able to keep a roof over the heads of her children. The challenges that she was facing relative to this relationship were significant because he was the cause of her discontinuing her education in the past. She made that fact clear when she stated:

I don’t have a social life. I work full time and I come here full time and I start an additional class next week. So, I really don’t have time. I’m a divorcee, and when I was married my ex-husband said he wanted me to get my degree, but he was not supportive.

This comment was meaningful because it gave light to the fact that he was the cause of her discontinuing her degree. The comment was even more significant because, even though a relationship had caused her to discontinue her degree program before and the issues of her former marriage were unresolved, she still as she would later admit, desired a dating relationship and was stressed because she did not have one.

The fact that she continued to view her lack of a dating life as a source of stress for her was an indication that she was in fact having some self-esteem challenges. Particularly, since she spoke of an additional more current relationship that was more recently causing problems in her life. The relationship she spoke of was with an ex-
boyfriend that was manipulating her and causing current problems in her life, to the point
that she was finding herself unable to concentrate in her classes.

Conversely, even though participant #2 had the looming issues of past relationship
hurts currently affecting her life she later explained how significant having someone in
her life was to her. Later in the focus group dialogue she discussed how she felt isolated
and expressed that having that “special” person to talk to would be helpful in her degree
completion. It was obvious for her that not having a social life and her social life issues
affected her greatly and that the stress of her present social life interactions could very
likely cause her to discontinue her education as it has in the past.

The participants seemed to be very concerned with having that special someone
and participant #5 offered her account as to why having that special person was so
important to her:

The significant other or the steady person is the people that you can express
yourself to freely. Your best friends may not even know one thing in
particular about you, but that person may. And you can be open at the end of
the day when you’re stressed out and school sucks and whether they want to
hear it or not, you talk about your day and you release and you relax and you
joke and it kind of makes everything better. For me at the end of the day a
relationship balances and I don’t have that right now. So, I have those
moments. And I’m not very emotional and my friends have not seen a tear
drop from my eye, but now I’m becoming more emotional and it’s because I
don’t have that release. I don’t have that person to release to and say to them
that those people at work made me want to strangle them or there’s this
particular class that is giving me a headache. When I get home I can’t express that to anyone. They may judge me, but they are not going to outwardly judge me at that time. So, its me alone in my room and I get to that particular class and I didn’t get a chance to tell someone and they make me laugh. When I get to that class I still hate it and I didn’t get a chance to release, and sometimes your grade suffers and you don’t go, and some teachers feel that if you don’t come three times then the unexcused absences affect you. It affects me when I don’t have that person.

Participant #5’s account gave credence to the fact that the participants were affected by social life issues. Her account gave credence because like she stated she is otherwise a collected person and for her to stress the need to have a significant other most definitely lays the foundation for the participants that were not as collected to be affected by their lack of social life and social life issues as well. Tinto’s (1993) understanding of the importance of engagement for students in a college environment was greatly supported by the aforementioned perceptions of the importance of social interactions and issues by the participants.

Like the above mentioned participants the majority of the participants viewed not having a social life or social life issues as a stressor that could possibly affect their contribution to attrition. For them the lack of a quality social life or social life issues was a festering issue that could at some point interfere or that has interfered in the past with their attainment of a degree.
Lack of Spousal Support

For a few of the participants, the difficulties of being a mother and a spouse challenged and later caused them to discontinue their college educations. Some of the participants thought they would be leaving indefinitely, but after the resolution of their marriages found themselves in positions financially that caused them to revisit the benefits of attaining a college education. The common thread among a few of the participants regarding the relationships of their former marriages to their attainment of an education is that their spouses expressed that they would be supportive of their pursuit of a college education in theory, but neglected to provide the necessary support in the home. For the participants that have either been married or that are currently married, the lack of spousal support seemed to reign high on their list of possible future and past deterrents towards realizing their goals of attaining an associate’s degree. One participant spoke of her former spouse in stride and had the attitude that everything happens for a reason and that she just was not meant to be in school at the time that she was married. Another participant was obviously still bitter about a recent divorce and felt her former spouse was the cause of her inability to complete her degree at an earlier stage in her life. A more embittered account of her spousal experiences. The final participant that felt that she was having challenges with spousal support seemed to feel that the added stress of having to deal with her children without the continuous help of her spouse was a source of stress and was somewhat of a repayment on her part for being able to stay at home and not join the workforce. Thus, it was apparent through participant dialogue that spousal support played a significant role in degree completion.
The lack of spousal support seemed to most significantly challenge the manner in which the participants viewed their dreams and aspirations as significant within their marriages. Their views about family related sacrifice solidified the level of value that they placed on themselves. There seemed to be a more passive view of what their plights should be relative to maintaining the stability of their families. As bell hooks (1981) has stated in her thoughts on black feminism, there is an overwhelming charge by society and subconsciously sometimes by African-American men to downplay the significance and value of the needs and aspirations of the African-American woman. Hooks talks about how society as a whole diminishes the needs and desires of African-American women and how that cycle is perpetuated in some instances by African-American men. There is a question that is raised when viewing the role of the African-American women within the family unit and that is why must she forgo her needs, dreams, and desires to take a more extensive role within the family unit?

A few of the participants give their perceptions as to the relationship that their spouses or former spouses had on their ability to actively pursue their degrees. Participant #1 explained that the reason she left school in the past was because her family life was challenging and because she had a young child and the responsibility of that child most heavily weighed on her shoulders. She explained that she felt that the responsibility of her child required all of her time so she left school and focused her complete attention on her child and maintaining her family unit. She stated: “I started college, but I didn’t finish because I got married and had a child and my focus had to go there.” She expressed that being the person that carried the majority of the day to day care of her child proved to be too taxing for her to be able to focus on school, so she left.
She seemed saddened by the fact that she had to discontinue her college education earlier, but rationalized her decision by saying that she had a higher charge and that was to be a good mother.

The participant’s perceptions of spousal support seemed to weigh heavily on the participants determination as to whether or not to discontinue their educations. For participant #2 it was a different account of how she was affected by her spouse, but nonetheless, the lack of spousal support that she received was definitely a deterrent in her degree completion. She sadly spoke of how her former marriage was a significant deterrent to her attainment of a degree as follows:

When I was married my ex-husband said that he wanted me to get my degree, but he was not supportive, and I didn’t get it. I was getting stressed from work, home, and school. I was taking a full load and working full time. Going to school full time and parenting twenty four seven and you cant turn parenting off that’s twenty four seven. It’s like I was trying to juggle all of that and my brain was like you are tired, you have to stop something and I kept pushing myself and I got my first F. I then got two Cs and I said that I have to slow down and get my GPA back up. I passed the Regents’ test and I stopped. It took nine years for me to come back. There was a point before that when I tried to come back when I was married and he was like yeah I wasn’t you to get your degree, but when it came time for me to get it the support was not there. And I was like I can’t do this and I had to keep the household happy. Even though that really was important to me, but I guess his happiness was a little bit more important than mine.
The formerly mentioned participant’s accounts were similar because they both discontinued their educations because of the relationship that they had with a spouse. Both men gave the appearance that they were supportive in theory, but when it came to them actually being participatory partners, they were not. Participant #2’s account was the most extreme because during the demise of her marriage her self-esteem was heavily challenged and even though that relationship has been over for some time, it affected her so heavily until she was crying during the interview when she was discussing her former marriage. The negative affects of the marriage to her self-esteem was made quite apparent during her participation in both the interview and the focus group.

Conclusively, there was a final participant that gave a strong appearance that she was happy, but when she began to discuss her situation with her spouse it was obvious that she was experiencing some challenges as well. They were not affecting her as heavily and the challenges of participant #2 were affecting her, but they were causing her to contemplate leaving due to her feelings of being overwhelmed. Participant #7 seemingly has ideal situation in that she does not work and her job according to her family unit is to be the provider of her children’s needs, but still seemed to be somewhat unhappy because she says that her husband’s lack of day-to-day support is causing increased amounts of stress for her and is challenging her ability to focus on school. She is a stay at home mother and has three children. She says that she has a good husband and a relatively happy life, but that she feels overwhelmed and finds it difficult to handle the pressures of her family and school, because her husband does not provide what she feels to be an adequate amount of assistant with their children. Her exact words were,
“My husband allows me to go to school, but on the down side he’s not as hands on with the kids as I would like, and that causes a little stress.”

Lack of Family Support

Several of the participants cited the lack of family support as a source of stress for them during their matriculation. The participants that cited family support as a possible stressor were mostly single and felt that their families’ lack of support contributed to their stress levels and added undue pressure for someone that is trying to attain a college degree. One of the participants cited the lack of family support as an issue because her mother was supposed to be the most supportive person in her life, but was proving to be the one that lacked the most support. Surprisingly, a couple of the participants stated that their children were the primary sources of stress because of their lack of support. The majority of those that cited the lack of family support as one of their stressors seemed to be disheartened and feel overwhelmed by the fact that their family members were not supporting such a monumental challenge in their lives.

Participant #1 articulated that challenge when she expressed that her daughter was not as supportive as she felt that she could be, especially considering that she initially delayed her pursuit of a degree in order to ensure the care of her daughter. She further mentioned that her daughter just does not understand what it means to be a single person with a full time job trying to attain a degree at her age. She said specifically that, “I don’t think that she understands how hard it was to have raised children and then go to school and have a full time job and you are still trying to maintain a 4.0. She doesn’t quite have that understanding.” She seemed angry because the person that she left school to take
care of initially is not as cooperative as she feels she should be for someone that is such a
close relative and that she has tirelessly supported. The lack of family support was
stressful to the participants. They all viewed family as a major part of their lives and felt
that if they were not on board with their education then trying to complete an education at
their current age would be that much more difficult.

Participant #5 added an addendum to the challenges that were faced by participant
#1. Participant #5 is a 32-year-old woman that works one full time job and a second part
time job. She is the youngest of six siblings and the only girl. She expressed that there is
a tremendous amount of pressure on her from her family to graduate from college, but
also to serve as the ambassador for education for her family. The reason that she is seen
as the ambassador is because of all her siblings she is the only one to graduate from high
school and subsequently the only one that is pursuing a postsecondary education. Thus,
she is the only one that her parents feel is “doing something with her life.” It was
obvious that her parents were a great source of stress and their lack of support in the past
had contributed to her lack of persistence. The stress that her parents contributed was
two fold because they were not helping her to complete her degree, but they were
constantly on her wanting to know when it was that she was going to finish. As Tinto
(1993) states, it is imperative that all factors of a student’s life be balanced and
considered when considering what constitutes a successful matriculation, and it the
instance of participant #5, her life was out of balance and the support that she was
needing from her parents was not happening for her and it was causing her to question
her ability to complete her degree.
Participant #5 expressed that a large part of her stress lies in the fact that her family just does not realize how difficult it is to try and work full time and obtain a college degree. She maintains that the reason that she left school the first time was due to her inability to pay for her classes and feels that since it was her parent’s idea for her to go to college that they should have been willing to take on some of the financial cost of her attendance, but they were not. She stated:

The first time that I went to school, I had a plan, I was going to the military and I took the ASVAB. I told my recruiter to come down and I told my parents. The recruiter said that with the scores that I had I could have been an engineer who is what I wanted to do, but my parents didn’t want me to go. I was the baby girl, the only girl and they were like no way. My mom convinced me to go to college first. I would have had money to do this and that if I would have went to the military. My mom told me that if I went to college that I would enter as an officer. Her ulterior motive was to not to get me to go to the military. She didn’t want me to go to the military. I was the youngest and the only girl. They pushed me and wanted me to go to college, but when it came down to paying for it they had no money or were not willing to take out any loans to pay for my education. I was struggling and I just couldn’t do it any more, and for five years I kept getting from them when are you going back? And I finally I was like I’m going back to school when I’m ready to go back because the first time nobody helped me. Then when I went back, they were asking when are you graduating? I finally said that I will graduate after I take all of the classes that I need to graduate.
She further stated that she feels a significant amount of stress from her parents because they are constantly putting pressure on her about what it is that she is going to do with her life. Unlike participant #5, participant #7 had a family support issue but it was unique in nature.

When participant #7 was asked who she felt was her biggest detractor, she strangely said that her biggest detractor was her nine year old son. She said that he was her biggest detractor because he requires so much of her time and attention and keeps her from focusing on her studies. She said that her other children are more autonomous and that unlike them he requires a lot of time and attention. She expressed feeling overwhelmed with him and said that:

When he is failing I start to fail. He’s a fourth grader and I would expect him to be a little bit more independent, but he is always like mommy can you do this or that for me, and I have to keep up with his assignments and mine.

The look on her face exemplified the fact that he was obviously a handful, and that she truly felt that he was an inhibitor towards her education. The following participant added a very serious tone to the affects of the lack of family support.

Participant #8, a 36-year-old mother of two and a soon to be unemployed and homeless woman, said that she was saddened by the fact that her family was not supportive of her pursuit of a college degree initially and that was the source of angst for her. Particularly because she has always according to her been the person that took care of everyone. She mentioned that she had been the sole caregiver for her nieces and nephews while her sister got on her feet, but she realized soon that she was not getting the same level of support. She was obviously sad when she said that:
In the beginning it was like whose going to pick up the children? They were like how are you gonna do this and how are you gonna do that, but now it seems to be a little bit easier, and they seem to be more enthused about it. She expressed that it took for her to be in college for a while for them to get on board with providing the extra help that she needed in order to continue her degree. She said that the fact that they were apprehensive at first upset her because she felt that she was always on board with helping everyone else whenever they needed her. She also had other extreme family issues that were not allowing her to focus on her education adequately.

The family issues that are affecting participant #9 are issues that have in some way affected her for almost thirty years. She offered that she has always had family issues and that they have never been supportive of her pursuits of anything, thus they certainly were not supportive of her pursuit of an education due to their inability to understand its value.

Participant #9 who is a 42-year-old bus driver, mother of four, and newly engaged woman, says that she does not want to spend the remainder of her career life as a bus driver and that she would like to do better for herself, but she said sadly that her children were her biggest detractors. Her understanding of why her children were her biggest detractors was because they were consistently surrounded by family members that do not value the benefits of an education. Therefore, because they had not witnessed an environment where education was valued, then they did not value it. She says that the only child that she receives support from is one of her daughters and the reason she supports her is because she is also enrolled at the same institution.
Participant #9 offered an excellent account of how families that are not educated do not know what it means to support a family member that is seeking a postsecondary education. Thus, their influence is often negative towards the person that is trying to pursue a degree, and that presence of negativity is often so overpowering that the family member that is trying to pursue a degree is permanently distracted and in some instances does not persist. A good example relative to participant #9 is the fact that she dropped out of high school due to the family issues that she was having.

Finally, the lack of family support as expressed by one participant in particular often comes from unexpected places. Participant #10, is a 26-year-old newly wed that is unable to drive, has been diagnosed with stress related depression, and has since been prescribed medication for her depression. Her inability to drive is significant because her only means of transportation to and from school is her husband who works a full time job himself. She expressed sadly with a very hurt and distant look in her eyes that the one person that she would think would be supportive her mother, was not at all supportive. She also said that her aunt was not supportive and that her aunt felt that because she and her husband were experiencing some financial challenges that she should leave school and get a full time job, but she said that she does not want a job, but that she wants a career. The impact of her family’s lack of support, particularly her mother, was significantly weighing on her. She explained that because of her depression and her feelings of being overwhelmed, she has considered suicide. She has had to have increased medications to offset her thoughts of suicide.
Lack of Personal Focus

Several of the participants gave varying accounts of how they were not personally focused at times throughout their postsecondary matriculations. The majority stated that their own self doubt was the cause of their lack of focus. Several of the participants gave accounts of how overwhelming their lives were and how being in school contributed to their feelings of being overwhelmed. They stressed that there are times where they feel like they should just go back to their lives and forget about pursuing a degree. Participant #2 emphasized how she has a tremendous amount of anxiety about the amount of time that being in school detracts from her life. She expressed that moderately when she said:

This time I have kind of doubted myself because I’m like girl you are pushing 40, can you handle this. It’s like ok, but I’m glad I made it this far, and I still have my doubts. Where I’m like girl you just need to stop and go back to the life that you had before and you will not have to study and you will not have to stay up all night doing this, so just let it go.

There was a looming uncertainty on the face of participant #2 when she made this statement. The statement was meaningful because it exemplified the thought process of nontraditional students that have been out of school for extended periods of time and feel overwhelmed with getting back involved in the schooling process. They all were accustomed to their lives being a certain way and being back in school just added a new element of anxiety.

Participant #6 describes herself as a woman of many talents, and according to her those talents often cause her to want to leave school and pursue them.
I have many talents and I have a business mind. So, I think I can just stop here and I could do my singing and my dancing full time. I think I can do my singing full time and get in the studio and become a back up singer. Then I think there is a time and place for that. I think that if I go with my talents then I might be happier and I might make more money, quick. And I can use my talents and my business side then I back up and I think it could have happened. I just have to sat the timing is not here yet.

She, like many of the other participants, became unfocused at different times thinking about how their lives could be different if they were not in school. Participant #10 was the most severe example of the lack of personal focus. She explained that she felt depressed because her life should have been further along by now. The fact that she was only at the two-year college level educationally was causing her to experience great stress and depression. She continued to say that she was really upset with herself for not being further along educationally.

*Lack of Coworker Support*

The lack of coworker support emerged as a theme under the dominant theme of personal perceptions because a few of the participants felt that the people that they spend 40 hours or more out of the week with could be helpful contributors to their educational goals if they were supportive, but most participants cited that their coworkers were not at all supportive. A few of the participants felt particularly disheartened by this fact because they have spent over 15 years at their places of employment. They felt that the coworkers were at times jealous of their impending accomplishment and that some would
or have made it difficult for them to do what is needed of them to maintain balance between their work and school lives. The expressions of their feelings regarding the lack of coworker support varied from those that felt they could not let their coworkers know that they were in school, and thus they could not ask for their coworkers’ support when they needed to do something school related. To those that felt that their coworkers were jealous enough to perhaps sabotage their pursuit of a degree if they knew about them being students.

Participant #1 seemed angry and a little disgruntled when she spoke about her coworker interactions. She felt that because she has been employed with the same company for numerous years that the administration at her company should be more supportive of her holistically, but specifically relative to her degree pursuit. She expressed that she is the coworker of several men that are not of the same ethnic background as her. Therefore, she already feels like she is at a disadvantage when trying to discuss her plight with them. She believes, like bell hooks (1981) espouses, that society has a patriarchal order and that that order is often submerging to African-American women. Participant #1 believed that there was no room for them to support her because they first would have to respect her as a contributing and important member of society and they did not. They according to her solely saw her as a clerk that should and was going to remain in that capacity if they were at all involved with it. She said that they referenced her as being a very outspoken African-American woman and according to her there was no place for outspoken females, particularly African-American ones within their environment. Her sentiment relative to her job is as follows:
I am not satisfied with my current job and I have been there for 19 years. I have not received not one promotion and that’s due to there’s no need to record. Anyway, I am definitely not satisfied with my job, and I have been employed there for 19 years and I have never had a promotion.

She said that again in a manner that would suggest that she had to repeat it because it was just not believable.

There have been people that have had less experience that I have actually trained that have been promoted over me. I know that one reason that I have not been promoted is because I have been known to be very outspoken and an aggressive person and so I think that in Georgia that is not a good thing. I think that being outspoken and aggressive is not something they think is appropriate.

She felt that her management in particular would not understand or support her aspirations and thus felt that she had to keep her pursuit of a degree a secret. The stress of keeping the makings of a major life’s accomplishment a secret was an issue for participant #2 as well. She expressed that her coworkers just would not understand and that she thought that it was best not to tell them because she was unsure as to how they would react. Her words were:

As far as my place of employment, there are only three people there that I have told. My management is not among those three. At this time I don’t think it’s a good time for my management to know, because at this time it might come back to haunt me.
She further expressed that her management has proven that they are not in support of her and have shown their disapproval of her through consistently overlooking her for advancements, and allowing people that do not have the same level of management ability to become her supervisors. Being overlooked for advancement opportunities was a recurrent theme among the participants and significantly increased their levels of stress because they felt stuck in positions that were not yielding mental or financial gains.

**Summary**

The majority of the participants cited personal life issues as being the reason behind their past lack of persistence. They spoke about feeling overwhelmed by family and spousal issues in conjunction with their pursuit of a degree. Also, the participants discussed how the emotional strain of having personal challenges has caused some participants to continuously think about not persisting. For them, it is a daily challenge to persist due to the issues that they face in their personal lives.

**Dominant Theme: Professional factors**

The inclusion of professional factors as a measure of participant perceptions gave resonance to the fact that in most institutions of higher learning’s nontraditional students are likely to be employed full time during their pursuit of a college degree. Thus, when determining the best measures to provide adequate access for nontraditional students it is imperative to consider the fact that it is not in most instances an option for them as to whether they are employed. For the majority of the participants working full time is essential because they are often the sole providers for their households. In the instance of
the studied participants, 6 out of the 10 are the only adults that are in the household, and subsequently the only persons in their households that are working.

Also, the demands of their jobs did not always work cohesively with the demands of pursuing a college degree. For instance, most of the participants spoke of having low to moderate paying jobs. They further explained that having these jobs often prohibited their ability to attend classes regularly because often their management either did not know or would not care about their pursuit of a college education, and demanded their presence for hours well past their allotted schedule. With all the aforementioned factors considered, when the participants were asked had they had any career success thus far, they all unanimously said no. There were several themes that emerged during the interviews with participants in regard to the affect that their jobs were having on their pursuit of a college education. The themes were as follows and are cited in Table 3:
(a) the effects on being the sole household provider, (b) the effects of a highly demanding job, (c) the degree utility and relationship to success.

Table 3

*Professional Factors*

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<th>Degree Utility and Relationship to Success</th>
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* An asterisk is indicative of the relationship of the participant to the theme.

**Emergent Themes: The Pressures of Being the Sole Household Provider**

As previously stated many of the participants are single with children. Therefore, they bare the majority of the burden when it comes to ensuring the quality of life for themselves as well as for their families. For most being the sole providers for their families has proven to be extremely stressful. Especially because most of the participants are in jobs that they feel is low paying and populated by individuals that often times do not value education enough to respect their decision to pursue a postsecondary education. Participant #1 explains how often life just happens and circumstances are outside of your control. She talks about the difficulties in being the only person that is working in a household, and expresses how much easier she feels her home life would be with someone else in the household. Her comment was:
It’s hard, yes I’m the only person working in the household, and it’s hard financially with just one person. I mean I think you would have to, I mean the probably if I cut out some of the shopping (laughs), it would help. I believe that you should enjoy yourself in life. Everything is inflating, utilities are rising and I had to get another car. Everyone was telling me that I needed another car, but there wasn’t anyone there that is going to help.

There were also several other participants that found that being the sole financial provider for their households were the extreme source of stress. Participant #2 expressed extreme stress for having to be the sole provider for her household by saying:

Yes it was very stressful but now it’s not as stressful because I’m consistently working and now receiving child support from my ex-husband. The bills can be overwhelming and the children have needs. Also, I had to move twice because the payments were too high. However, God made a way.

Their statements were significant because the threat of being unable to meet their financial obligations was consistently a source of stress. As Maslow (1943) stated, before there is self-actualization and a person can attain their ultimate goals, their basic needs have to be met. In instances such as the participants a degree is a form of self-actualization and their financial obligations are essentially associated with their basic needs. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult to pursue a quality education without having the stress of being able to meet basic needs.

Participant #3 concurred and said that she found it extremely stressful being the only provider in her household and that being an only parent contributed even more stress. She found that having the job that she has and being the only contributor to her
household income makes it even more stressful for her because she has to work long hours and in her spare time only wants to sleep. Participant #8 further agreed and stated:

Yes, it takes a lot living pay check to pay check. If I had that extra help it wouldn’t be so much on me not being able to buy something for myself that bothers me. Not having just a little bit for myself everything goes towards bills.

All of the participants offered their accounts of what it feels like to be the sole providers in their households and they all agreed that it is very difficult to have to provide for their families, while working and going to school. Sadly, three of the participants at some doing their matriculations were facing the threat of being homeless with children.

*The Effects of High Job Demands*

Studies have shown that without some degree of higher education it will be virtually impossible to find a job. The jobs that are afforded those persons that lack a higher education are often menial levels of employment. The participants mostly agreed that the employment that they were able to obtain demanded high levels of work with out yielding what they felt were sufficient outcomes. Participant #1 spoke of how she felt that her employers wanted her to work long hours and do more work than her peers without giving her the level of freedom or promotion potential. She expressed that her job was very stressful mainly because she had been there for almost 20 years but had not received one raise. For her, coming down off of her work day was very difficult for her, and getting in the mind set for class was becoming increasingly difficult. Participant #5 found that trying to attain a college degree in conjunction with a highly demanding job to
be beyond difficult as well. She went on to explain about how being a manager in her current position led to her increased levels of stress and dismay with completing her degree. She elaborated by saying:

It’s a lot more responsibility when you have to manage people. A lot of times I can not leave my job like everyone else. I have to worry about what numbers I made today, or who didn’t make their numbers. So, my responsibilities at my job keep my mind going even after I leave work. So, when I get to school sometimes I’m thinking about work. When I have an employee that isn’t doing what they should be doing. Unfortunately, that’s something that I’m learning how to deal with. Sometimes work does play a part in my thoughts of leaving, because sometimes I’m not as focused. I have to think about certain things and sometimes on the weekend I’m still in work mode when I need to be in school mode.

The participants’ perception of their jobs was that the jobs at any moment could cause them to have to leave school. They all concurred that work was their first priority and that they had no choice but to pay their bills. When participant #5 was asked if she found the attainment of a college education challenging as a nontraditional, she reiterated her former statement and said that she found it:

Very challenging because with work being the main priority because you have to pay your bills, school is secondary, but you want to attain your degree. You want to get it so it’s like a balancing act. Because if you have to work late and something runs over, there’s nothing you can do about it and
you’re missing classes or your running late for classes and the teacher
doesn’t really understand, it becomes an issue.

Most of the participants agreed that the challenges of their jobs quite often conflicted
with their school schedules. Participant #2 had a similar circumstance as participant #5.

She describes her experiences at work as a never ending cycle. For her work lasted until
her assignment was over, which meant for her that she would have to stay at her job
sometimes well after her scheduled time was over and would have to work until she made
significant enough progress. Her account of her high demanding work experience is as
follows:

    I come in the door working and the majority of the time I’m there passed my
eight hours and my lunch break is just forty five minutes to an hour. There
were a couple of times this year that I had to stay late because I had to finish
something. And with school you can’t miss a lot even if you are 15 to 20
minutes late. It would dampen my spirit to where I couldn’t really focus
when I got to class. I would be thinking if I could have gotten to class a little
bit sooner, or if I had a little bit longer for lunch at work then I would be a
little bit more prepared and focused. It would get a little stressful. If I had a
paper that I needed to do or a project I needed to finish I would be thinking
what I could do to get out of here a little bit sooner so that I can get to school.
So, it was like juggling, like what should I do? Sometimes it just feels like I
need another job. I’ve been here long enough let a fresh mind take that job to
another level.
Participant #3 had a different take on the demands of her job. While most agreed that their jobs were interfering with their schooling, she felt as if her schooling was quite often interfering with her job performance. Her job is a performance and numbers generated warehouse job and because of that it is imperative that she be alert. She offered her account in response to participant #2:

I would like to say that is goes both ways if I would have stayed up late the night before studying for a test or something like that and then have to go to work. What I do is basically ordering, so the numbers start to get blurred and what may look like three hundred starts to look like three thousand, and I get into trouble about that. Then it causes problems and at work they are like you’re drinking coffee and you’re tired, what have you been doing? Stuff like that and they know that you have been going to school. Then you get to class and you are late again and they are like why are you late and I’m like you want to know everything, you want me to give you a list? I left work late and I had to pick up the baby, then I had to change clothes and get me something to eat. Then they are like you are very sarcastic and I’m like I don’t come to school late just for no reason. It’s frustrating and I will get snappy with them if they come off wrong and I feel attacked because you never know what a person goes through when you do that.

At least half of the participants felt that the demand of a mandatory overtime was causing stress in their pursuit of a college education. A couple of the participants mentioned having to work over 50 hours per week. Participant #3 spoke about the spontaneity of the overtime that she would have to work. Her superiors would tell her at
the last minute that she would have to work a mandatory overtime and a minimum of a certain amount of hours. Her frustration relative to the mandatory over time was not solely relative to her trying to attain a degree, but also relative to the fact that she would have to pay a baby sitter to sit with her son. Participant #5 at the time of the study was working almost sixty hours per week and had two jobs while trying to attain her degree. The circumstances and experiences relative to work life that the participants experienced for some would be an insurmountable task in conjunction with trying to get a quality education. The high job demands affected the participant’s minds, bodies, and spirits. Thus, their jobs affected their ability to focus on school and school affected their ability to focus on their jobs. It is unfortunate but for some having to handle both responsibilities simultaneously was enough to make them consider discontinuing their pursuit of a degree.

Degree Utility and Relationship to Success

Interestingly, several of the participants expressed that on several occasions they have felt anxiety about the benefits of attaining a college degree at this juncture in their lives. They voiced concerns and agreed with each other that perhaps they have all felt that they could have been pursuing something else that could have yielded more instantaneous results. For participant #6, being in school currently meant forgoing her desire to pursue her dreams of being a singer and a dancer. She believed that she could have “made it as a performer” and constantly thinks about how her life could have been different had she pursued her dream instead of pursuing school. She explains her feelings as follows:
I have to say that when I see stop signs it’s because I have many talents, and I have a business mind. So, I think I can just stop here and do my singing and my dancing full time. I think I can do my singing full time and get in the studio and become a back up singer. Then I think there is a time and a place for that. I think that if I go with my talents then I might be happier and I might make more money, quick. And I can use my talents and my business side then I back up and I think it could have happened. I just have to say the timing is not here yet.

Participant #2 offers a similar account of her feelings about what she feels she could be doing if she weren’t in school: “The second time around I would just think about all of the stuff that I could have been doing.” Participant #5’s account was similar as well and she stated that:

Like number six said there are so many things that I would like to get my hands into. I want to do an independent film. All of my friends tell me that I should sing. My mother is a hustler so I have that entrepreneur spirit. But in the back of my head I’m like banking is not what I want to do with the rest of my life. I can make money without having a degree. You don’t have to have a degree to have a decent job, but I don’t want a job because job means ‘just above broke.’ I want a career. So, it’s like there are so many other things that I want to do and that makes me want to stop. And my mom she was just like are we gonna be an actress now? She was like I think you should just work on your acting career right now, but when she realized that I wasn’t going to stop she was like well you just need to hurry up and graduate.
The relationship of degree utility to success was important even though it was not a common theme across all of the participants, the reasons being that those that cited it as a possible cause for delaying or discontinuing their college matriculations were so adamant about its relationship to their successful degree attainment, and obviously wavered back and forth about whether the sacrifice of getting a degree would enhance their professional lives enough to continue, especially since the participants felt that they could be doing something different with their time that would yield a quicker financial outcome.

Summary

The participants made clear that their professional lives were significantly affecting their degree pursuit. The challenges that they face relative to their professional lives were conflicting in various manners with their persistence. For example, the majority of the participants mentioned that they were the sole providers in their households. This factor was mentionable because the affects of having a job that did not meet their family’s financial needs was a constant undercurrent for the participants’ considering not to persist. Also, having a job that was highly demanding caused the participants to constantly consider not persisting. The participants felt that they needed their jobs, but that the demands of the hours and most often the administration were causing them to contemplate not persisting.

Dominant Theme: Academic Preparation

Many minority students do not receive the necessary academic preparation they need in order to survive the challenges they will face academically within a college
environment. For the participants, ninety percent of them felt that they were not adequately academically prepared before entering college. Interestingly, there were also participants that felt that the time lapse between when they ended their secondary educations and began their postsecondary educations were too vast. One participant expressed that because the lapse had been so long, she did not remember whether her highs school offered college preparatory classes or not.

Unfortunately, in addition to her, an overwhelming majority of the participants did not participate in the college preparatory track in high school, and felt that they were at a disadvantage when they began to take college courses. Also, all but one of the participants had been enrolled in a remedial course, and strangely those same students were most likely to have cited that they could not recall having a strong academic influence. The participants’ perceptions of the factors that affected their attrition rates were as follows: (a) Extended time out of high-school, (b) Lack of academic preparedness, (c) Lack of college preparatory track, (d) Lack of academic influence, and (e) The need for remedial courses (see Table 4).

**Emergent Themes: Extended Time Out of High School**

Participant #1 was very candid about her feelings about her academic preparation and very humorous in her responses. She was the oldest participant and her comments about her secondary education were clouded by the number of years that she had been out of school. She specifically stated in relation to her academic preparedness from high school:
Table 4

*An asterisk indicates the relativity of the theme to the participant.

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Extended Time Out</th>
<th>Was Not Adequately Prepared</th>
<th>No college Academically When in School</th>
<th>No strong Academic Influence</th>
<th>Placed in Remedial Courses at Entry of College</th>
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Girl I can’t even remember what I had in high school. I really can’t say. I have been out of high school for an extremely long time! When I had to take the placement test I did well because I have always done well in English. I learned English in high school. I went all the way to trigonometry in high school, but I lost it all somewhere!
After she made that statement, she roared with laughter, and the starry gaze in her eyes and the look on her face gave way to the fact that she was reflecting on years lost. There were more than two decades that had passed since this participant had been in an institution of higher learning for an extended amount of time. For her there was a certain amount of anxiety that she experienced while beginning her postsecondary education that specifically was relative to her having been out of the classroom for that period of time. It seemed as if she was agonizing over the fact that she had to take on the challenge of learning new things at this juncture in her life. The anxiety was such that on several occasions throughout the interview and focus group she mentioned having had the thought of discontinuing her education to pursue other things.

Participant #2 mentioned that being out of high school for an extended period of time proved to be a source of issue for her, and she felt like she just didn’t belong in a college environment at this stage in her life. Again, the anxiety that she experienced as a result of the time difference between her secondary and postsecondary educations is causing problems with her continued success because she is constantly questioning whether she belongs. For her it was more an issue of self-worth and faith in her ability to succeed academically.

Participant #6’s account for how she was affected by the length of time that she had been out of school was not as drastic as the previously mentioned participants. The only affect that being out of high school for an extended amount of time for her was the feeling of being out of the classroom environment for an extended amount of time. The most extreme instance relative to being out of school for an extended period for the participants was participant #9 and her account. She was a lot different from the other
participants because she did not complete her high school education in the usual allotment of time. She actually dropped out of school in the ninth grade. She said that she took a very interesting and unconventional path. She got her General Education Diploma (GED) from Job Corp and instead of going directly to college, she went into the army. For her the army was that place that conveyed to her the importance of having a college education. She says that the army has an extreme amount of illiterate and ignorant people in it, and they motivated her to go to college. She sadly mentioned that the impetus behind her dropping out of school when she did was that she had extreme family problems. She says that best in her simple statement with the saddest look in her eyes: “I was capable, but I dropped out in the ninth grade.” It seems like a simple enough statement and it may not seem like it’s that sad, but the look of torment on her face said it all. It was obvious that she felt she’d wasted a lot of time. She was trying to give off a hardened and stoic reflection of her time out of school, but it was very obvious that there was an awareness that she possessed relative to education that made her ashamed of not having pursued it earlier. Her constant movement and inability to make eye contact during this segment of the interview validated her discomfort.

*Lack of Academic Preparedness*

There seemed to be a consistency among the participants they mostly felt that they did not come from secondary environments that were challenging or that adequately prepared them academically at all. While some cited being out of school for an extended period of time and the changes in pedagogies from secondary to postsecondary institutions as their reasoning for being academically challenged in a college
environment, some cited that for them it was the lack of academic preparedness that caused their postsecondary academic insecurity.

Participant #2 candidly spoke about how she felt that she went through her secondary education feeling like she had an un-noticed learning disability. She says that while her parents were there to support her financially and emotionally, all they did for her academically was to give her whatever she needed in order to complete her tasks. She seemed as if she felt like she was invisible in high-school and graduated with what she felt was a deficiency in language arts, a deficiency that would later follow her into college. She expressed her thoughts about this deficiency when she said:

I never liked language arts, language arts was my biggest challenge. Science was ok, but with language I almost would have thought that I had a learning disorder. I was an ok student, but again I thought that I had an LD because of my language arts capabilities.

Participant #2 obviously had an issue with the fact that she was floating through high school with what she felt were serious challenges and there was no one seemingly that could or felt the need to address them. She later was placed in a remedial math and reading course when she entered college. The uncertainty that she felt in high-school carried over into her postsecondary education. There was not a transition for her from her secondary education into her postsecondary education. The lack of transition between the two in several instances within this study contributed to how the participants felt about their academic capabilities once they entered college. Transition occurs when students are at least moderately prepared for college curriculum via their secondary institutions. For the participants ninety percent cited that they were not prepared
academically by their secondary institutions and thus suffered academically in varying degrees during their postsecondary matriculations.

Also, the feeling that the classes were not challenging was an issue among the participants. They quit often cited that they did not feel that their secondary educations offered the needed academic foundation that they would need in order to matriculate successfully. For instance, participant #3 offered that she was not challenged at all by her secondary education. She felt that her individual needs were not met and had there been a better understanding of those needs, then she quite possibly could have been a better student.

For participant #3, her high school was broken into varying academies and the students could choose their academy based upon their area of interest. The academy that participant #3 chose was business. However, she felt that the foundation that this type of program provided did not offer enough insight into the pending academic challenges of pursuing a college degree. Because of that lack of preparedness, she expressed that it was difficult for her to exit out of the learning support division once she entered college and move on to the regular college classes.

It seems as though there is a consistency with the participants that they just did not get the foundation that is needed in order to successfully pursue a college degree. It would seem that the lack of academic preparedness would be most aligned with those participants that completed their secondary educations more than 15 to 20 years prior to enrolling in college, but the lack of academic preparedness was a common thread across almost all of the participants.
Lack of College Preparatory Track

There was an interesting phenomenon across the body of the participants and that was that the overwhelming majority of them were not on a college preparatory track when they were in high school. Two of the three students that were the oldest students of the studied group were unsure as to whether they were on a college track curriculum when they were in high school because they had been out of high school for a significant amount of time. The remaining elder of the group did not have an understanding of what it meant to be on a college preparatory track because she dropped out in the ninth grade. She seemed very uncomfortable with that fact and squirmed in her seat as she revisited the realization that she had dropped out of school at such a young age. Participant #2 offered that she had not been on the college preparatory track because she had no knowledge that she should be. She seemed really reflective and a look on her face that looked as if she wished that her parents had known how help her be better prepared for college. When asked whether or not she was on a college preparatory track, she said: “No I wasn’t; I was on the basic track. My parents did not pay attention to things like that. They were busy and had to work.”

While participant #3 recalled that her mother was very involved with making sure that her children understood the importance of an education, she unfortunately was not on the college preparatory track either. Participant #4 had a very caring mother, but her mother did not have the academic understanding to ensure that she would participate in the college preparatory curriculum at her high school either. She was under the impression that she had to try out to be on the college preparatory track as if she were trying out for a cheerleading squad. Then, there was participant #7 who seemed to be
really ashamed of the fact that she was on what she called the basic track. When she was asked whether she had been on the college preparatory track in high school, her only response was a curt: “No, general studies!”

*Lack of Academic Influence*

Studies suggest that positive parental influence is imperative for students in achieving positive academic outcomes. Since parents or parental figures are the first teachers of students, their influence or lack thereof contributes to the level of understanding and academic achievement of students.

It is a proven fact that including parents in the educational process for children is imperative to their educational outcomes. There are documented studies that state that there is disconnect between parental involvement and student learning outcomes. Students that enter community colleges are quite often first-generation college students. First-generation college students have been found to have less influence from their parents in regard to their college educations. The lack of parental influence quite often affects all areas of their college matriculations, from their college choice, to their self-efficacy in regard to their ability to complete (Calkins, 2005). The participants in this study were mostly first generation and there is a correlation between students that are first generation and their experiencing a lack of parental influence regarding college. Of course, parental knowledge of postsecondary education contributes to the overall influence that they have on their children regarding college matriculation and subsequently completion.
Several of the participants cited that they did not have anyone that they felt had a significant influence on them academically. And, for those that did site someone as having a significant influence only two had been influenced earlier in the secondary educations, but the remaining had not been academically influenced until they were well into pursuing a postsecondary education.

When participant #1 was asked whether she could recall someone that had influenced her academically she asked the question: “Now or then?” Then with a tone that was really matter of fact said:

I grew up with my grandmother and she was, a grandmother. So, I didn’t have that influence of you have to make good grades and you have to do this or you have to do that. She was a grandmother! I didn’t have a lot of heavy academic influence. My grandmother raised me and she didn’t know a lot about academics. She just knew how to take care of me and make sure that I had whatever I needed.

Participant #2 was similar in her account of how she had not had an academic influence. She recalled:

There was no big influence for me. They made sure that I had what I needed. I have five older brothers, and only one was there with me. He wasn’t really concerned with me. As far as my influence to go to college I have two brothers that have gone, and one graduated. They both influenced me, but I just didn’t feel like I was college material.

There was not anyone that specifically told either of the aforementioned two participants about the significance of going to college and what type of impact an education can have
on their lives. They were both surrounded by people that were workers and that focused on their jobs and their families, but did not have a real understanding of the significance of conveying to them why they should be concentrating on pursuing a postsecondary education. The urgency to pursue a college education just was not there for them because they just did not know the significance.

Participant #7 pondered for what seemed like several minutes before she could think of anyone that had significantly influenced her academically. She was obviously having a difficult time recalling someone. Then all of a sudden a look came across her face that seemed indicative of a light bulb going off within her head and she answered. The problem was that her academic influence had not come for her in her early foundational years, but had only come since she has been a student at the studied institution. She finally answered the question with the following: “Several groups of friends that are in college with me now! We all take classes together and we are each other's support group. We take classes together and so far I have been on the dean’s list twice.” What is sad about her reflection is that it took her that long to find a group of people that would motivate her academically and she was thirty four years old. There is a definite question that comes to mind in relation to participant #7 and that is what could have happened differently in her life had she had a positive academic influence earlier in her life. There is a common sense understanding that whatever you value is what you place the most emphasis on.

Participant #10 was the most despondent when asked who had influenced her most academically. She pondered for what seemed like an eternity before dryly saying: “Nobody. I guess I could say teachers, but no family members or anything, so, no one.”
Of all of the participants, she seemed to be the one that was most affected by her reflection that she had not had anyone to influence her academically. It was if she realized at that moment the impetus for having that type of influence in her life. This young woman seemed bitter that she had to find out the significance of a postsecondary education the hard way, through the trials and tribulations of life.

*The Need for Remedial Courses*

Through participant interviews during the discussion of remedial courses there was an obvious feeling of stress and shame as it related to those participants that were placed into remedial courses. A staggering ninety percent of the participants that were studied tested into remedial courses.

All but one of the participants upon entering college placed into one or more remedial classes. That is significant because those courses could determine that academic fate of the students that are mandated to take them. The courses are structured in such a way that a student only has so many attempts to pass the course, and after those attempts are failed the student has to go on a mandated leave of absence. For one of the participants, participant #7, this was her fate. She said that for her reading had always been a struggle and that she especially hated being timed. So, because she could not pass her remedial reading course, she was made to sit out. She was very disappointed in herself after failing the course and as a result decided not to return. The only reason that she states that she returned over a decade later was that she did not want to leave anything in her life incomplete. So, she decided to return to face her demon, and subsequently passed the course. However, that course would not be the end to her
reading challenges because she has since failed the Regents’ reading exam several times and is due to graduate but can’t until she passes the exam.

Summary

Ninety percent of the participants made it apparent that they had in fact experienced varying levels of anxiety during their college matriculations relative to their lack of academic preparedness. The participants discussed how factors like being out of high school for an extended amount of time affected their self-efficacy relative to being in college. Also factors like not having been on the college preparatory track and not having a strong academic influence affected their self-esteem relative to their ability to persist. Finally, having to complete remedial courses and the stress associated with being in remedial courses caused the participants in some instances to think about not persisting.

Dominant Theme: Institution Factors

The institution has a responsibility to ensure continuity in institutional offerings across the spectrum of its students. If the expectations of students to perform is unilateral, then the services that are available to ensure an equal opportunity matriculation should be necessitated. However, in the instance of the nontraditional student, and in this context the nontraditional African-American student, the services are not distributed equally. Thus, through dialogue the participants voiced concerns that if enacted could foster a more.

Decidedly, it is believed that when a student feels that he or she is valued as a contributing member of the student body, then they are, according to Tinto (1993), more likely to persist. Thus, institutions have a fiduciary responsibility to adhere to the needs
of all of its students, and in the instance of the studied institution because the majority of its students are nontraditional African-American women, they have more of an obligation to investigate and adhere to the needs of these students. Besides, it is time for the African-American female’s voice to be heard and for her to be welcomed as a contributing member of society and welcoming her presence in institutions of higher education could quite frankly be considered a substantial step in the right direction.

Bell hooks (1981) recounts the pitfalls that African-American females have experienced since their initial inhabitance of these United States of America from the 18th through the 20th centuries, and she speaks of how negligent this country has been in making her feel that she is a meaningful member of society. Thus, the impetus for her book, *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981) was to motivate society and institutions such as the educational institutions to not just give the African-American female an opportunity to matriculate, but to give her an audible voice. For centuries the needs of African-American women have been last to say the least on the list of needs assessment and first on the list of racism and sexism. Essentially, she has been somewhat invisible. For her there has been no place in feminism because the concept of feminism was idealized for the white American woman and sadly there was no place for her at the forefront of race relations because she was seen as needing to be subservient to her African-American counterpart. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that in order to understand the black woman, there must first be an understanding of her needs, desires, and places in society. Well, through education, that all can begin to happen and offering her a venue to express her perceptions about how she can be best offered a quality education is definitely a true
beginning, especially since, according to Sealey-Ruiz (2007), the discussions and decisions about black women continue to take place without their input.

For institutions such as the studied institution, a two-year institution, there is an obligatory need to respect an honor the needs of this sect of student because she is the mainstay and the bread and butter of their existence. African-American females that are considered nontraditional students have been enrolling in these institutions in increasing numbers. For the studied institution, African-American females account for the overwhelming majority of students. Through this study the participants were given an opportunity to be audible and the espouse what they felt were the needed changes. The accounts they gave in reference to the needed institutional changes were as follows: (a) Lack of college-wide services to evening students, (b) Inability to participate in college activities, (c) Availability of classes, (d) Adjustment issues and lack of administrative support, and (e) Need for nontraditional student specific counseling see Table 5).

**Emergent Themes: Lack of College-Wide Services to Evening Students**

Nontraditional students are generally students that have obligations outside of their pursuit of an education. Therefore, they need the institutions that they are attending to be equitable in the services that they are providing for them. Historically, African-American women have been marginalized educationally and otherwise. It would be offensive to say the least for her to be marginalized in an institution where she is the majority.
Table 5

**Institutional Factors**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Inability to Participate in Evening College Activities</th>
<th>Availability of Evening Classes</th>
<th>Adjustment Issues and Lack of Administrative Support</th>
<th>Need for Counseling Services Specific to Nontraditional Students</th>
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* An asterisk was used in order to show the relationship of the emergent themes to the participants.

The participants cited that they perceived the studied institution to be insensitive to the needs of nontraditional students. They gave accounts of how because of their work schedules and outside obligations they are often only able to take evening courses. Subsequently, they are only able to be available on campus during evening hours. Sadly, the services that they receive during the evening hours are not adequate or equitable to the services that the students experience during the day time hours. The participants felt
disdain toward the administration for seemingly forgoing their needs. They quite frankly wanted to know why they were good enough to enroll and pay their fees, but were not good enough to have equitable services. For instance, the majority of the college offices are only available during the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m., and most evening students do not arrive on campus until after 6:00 p.m.

How can the services of colleges such as the studied college not take into account the needs of the student that, according to the NCES (2002), is the new majority that is entering institutions of higher education at a staggering 56%. Guy (1999) states, “It is imperative that the educators of African-American female nontraditional students explore creative ways in which to better serve this marginalized group because they are projected to grow in number over the next decade” (p. 98).

Participant #5 made it really clear that she had an issue with the fact that the office privileges for evening students are not the same for those that attend classes during the day:

The thing that I have a problem with is more administratively. The fact that everything is closed by the time I get off work. The issues that I have are the classes that I have and my financial aid. I have to deal with all of that stuff and that’s the beginning of the semester before classes start. The bookstore doesn’t even stay open late and I have to rush from work to get to the bookstore. It’s that aspect, and if I have ant problems or concerns during the semester I have to take off from work to handle it. Sometimes that becomes a concern. It’s a strain because now I have to take off and figure out what I’m going to do. Prime example advisor wants to make it on their schedule
and whether or not they can make it on that particular day. That has become one of my major challenges as a nontraditional student, administration.

Participant #3 adds on to participant # 5’s response and that was:

Mine is exactly the same. No one told me exactly what I should do in terms of registering. I had just finished a learning support class and they all talked to me like I should have known that. They say that my advisor should have told me that, but I was like where do you go to get an advisor. Once you find out the information that you need to know and where you need to go, the people that you need are not available during that time.

The statements of the participants are pertinent because they offer an account as to the how they view the institutions treatment of students that do not attend classes during the day. Participants also suggested that the hours that are available for tutoring are not conducive to students that are evening students.

*Inability to Participate in College Activities*

Research suggests that there is a correlation between the amount of social interaction that students participate in and their persistence. Tinto (2001) suggests that the more students are academically and socially involved the more likely it is that they are going to persist. This is especially true for students that are within their first year of matriculation. Tinto says that involvement during that year is crucial because it serves as the foundation, and is the time that the initial relationships are cultivated. Tinto’s reasoning for asserting that social engagement is so important is because nontraditional
students are most likely to work in addition to going to school. Thus, the classroom and subsequently school environments are conduits for social engagements.

Tinto’s (2001) theory of social interaction is particularly important to the participants of this study because very few of the participants were involved with social interactions within the school, and described their personal social interactions as none existent outside of the school. They mostly cited that because they were evening students the activities that transpired on campus were unavailable to them. Thus, they were subsequently unable to participate. The participants that were able to participate in activities that were campus related had done so at one time, but were no longer interested in participating in that particular activity again. Those participants that cited that they were interested in pursuing an activity were uniformly interested in the honors society on campus because they were informed by an instructor that was also a former nontraditional student of the pros of participating in an honor society. Outside of those few instances where the participants were thinking of becoming involved, to date there was only one participant that was socially involved on campus and that was participant #4 the youngest participant in the group. Also, as stated within the data presented under the dominant theme, personal factors, the participants do not have a social life outside of school either.

*Availability of Classes*

Throughout the data, the participants cited their displeasure with the fact that the curriculum required classes that often times were not available to evening students.
Unfortunately, because some evening classes have been unavailable to students they have had to wait additional semesters in order to graduate.

Participant #3 stated in what seemed to be an angry tone that, “They need to make the good classes that are offered during the day available to the night students.” She, like the other participants, shared the sentiment that once again everything that was offered during the day should, in all fairness, be offered to the evening students. Participant #1 also concurred that the courses that were offered during the day were not offered to evening students and that made her matriculation that much more difficult because she had to work around the classes that were offered.

Adjustment Issues and Lack of Administrative Support

The majority of the participants were over the age of 30 and most had been out of school for considerable periods of time. Thus, there was often an anxiety that presented itself in the participants regarding their ability to matriculate successfully in a college environment because of their ages. The participants cited such things as registration anxiety and placement test anxiety as challenges that almost made them decide that perhaps a college education was not for them. The all seemed to be experiencing anxiety relative to being older and trying to attain a degree.

The students mostly cited a need to talk to someone that could support them in their issues as a nontraditional student. They mostly expressed being overwhelmed with the nuances of the administrative offices and feeling insecure because they were not familiar with the practices and did not want to seem ignorant so they did not want to ask. One participant said that she was so overwhelmed that she ran out of registration crying
and only returned because another student came to her and talked to her and explained the procedures for everything.

Other participants explained how they were angered about how some of the offices on campus treated students, and further explained how they have experienced some unpleasant challenges with the personnel within the offices. Participant #1 reflected on how she was treated in the financial aid office on campus.

There was an administrator in the financial aid office that was rude. Now I can clearly read, and I had just gotten into the office and the sign says that you should turn off your cell phone and when I got into the office my cell phone rang; and she says to me, ‘You need to turn that off!’ She was really rude and disrespectful with her tone and I was like, excuse me who are you talking to? And she began to say the sign says turn your cell phone off, and I tell her that I’m very aware of what the sign says, but don’t be disrespectful with it. If I was a nineteen year old or a ninety year old she didn’t have to be disrespectful. I immediately turned the phone off, but when you go into some of the offices the people are disrespectful and unprofessional people. There are people that have told me that they left because of that.

The significance of the statement made by participant #1 is that the office and their customer service has a lot to do with the retention of students, particularly ones like the participants that are nontraditional and are often times having challenges of their own before they enter a campus. The affect of the behaviors of the professionals on campus could quite possibly be a contributing factor in why students decide to go to other institutions.
In addition to the account of the unpleasant experience that participant #1 had, participant #3 agreed that the challenges that she has mostly experienced has been with the administrative offices as well. She stated that her experience more of an academic challenge, and that challenge was that no one told her what to do once she completed learning support and needed to register for her college level classes. She said that everyone just assumed that she would know what came next in terms of her registration, but she did not. Then she further stressed that because she is an evening student once she found out who it was that she needed to talk to the person was most often unavailable. Therefore, it was virtually impossible for her to get the assistance that she needed. Thus, it was that much more difficult for her to register for classes. She was not alone in her advisement and registration issue. Participant #5 also gave her account of how the registration process was not conducive to a nontraditional student. She was also extremely excitable about the fact that she could not get the assistance that she needed in order to register for her classes. She said:

The thing that I have the problem with is more administratively too. The fact that everything is closed by the time that I get off work. The issues that I have are the classes that I have and my financial aid. I have to deal with all of that stuff and that’s the beginning of the semester before classes even start. The bookstore doesn’t even stay open late and I have to rush from work to get to the book store. It’s that aspect, and if I have any problems or concerns during the semester I have to take off from work to handle it. Sometimes that becomes a concern. It’s a strain because now I have to take off and figure out what I’m going to do. Prime example, my advisor wants to make it on
their schedule, and whether or not they can make it on that particular day.

That has become one of my major challenges as a nontraditional student, administration.

*Need for Nontraditional Student Specific Counseling*

While nontraditional students wish to be treated fairly across the spectrum of institutional services, there is still a need for population specific services, particularly in the instance of servicing nontraditional students. The participants of this study stressed that they often felt overwhelmed and that they felt that having counseling services that were specific to them would be beneficial. Several of the participants stated that they have felt like leaving on numerous occasions because they felt that they just did not have anyone to talk to that would understand their needs in particular. They spoke about the challenges that they face on a daily basis with trying to balance work, school, and children. They all basically agreed that they would want someone that was specifically allocated for nontraditional students that could understand their plight and offer them some good advice.

Participant #2 mentioned that it would be great for her to have someone to talk to because she does not want to burden her family any more than she already has with her issue. She currently says that she keeps her feeling to herself because she does not want to feel like she is overloading anyone else, and she does not have any friends that she can confide in that would understand. She began her statement by expressing how guilty she has felt being back in school and being away from her family and she questions her ability to complete a degree program. She said:
I’m feeling guilty for being back in school and I have cried and I’m like why didn’t I do this when I was younger. And I’m thinking do I have it. I’m questioning myself and my mental abilities and everything and a lot of times when I’m having these thoughts I feel like I don’t have any one to talk to. And I don’t want to talk to my friends and family about it because I’m like they worry about me enough. My brothers will sometimes call out of the blue if my parents have told them something and ask are you ok? They’ll say are you ok? I here that you are loosing weight and I’m like I’m fine and they are like no you aren’t. I’m like I’m fine because I don’t want them to worry about me anymore. It was great talking to you the first time because it took a load off of my shoulders and I was feeling really down at the time. Again, I have this weight on me and I don’t want to bother any one. So, I keep it to myself. And eventually I’ll be about to explode and I will do the tear thing. I’m not dating any one and I don’t go out so I need someone to talk to. And I don’t trust easy because I have told people stuff and I hear it again and its like how did you know that about me. So, that’s where I am right now I don’t have anyone to talk to.

The sentiment that surrounded participant #2’s response was very sad, and she made it apparent that having an outlet for this particular group was very important to their survival in a college environment. They were all very much overwhelmed. Participant #8 shared the sentiment of participant #2 in that she felt extremely overwhelmed because of her life’s circumstance and she felt as if having someone to talk to would be beneficial to her as well. She said, “Sometimes you don’t have that person to talk to because you feel
like you are burdening other people, but we are always available to talk to others.”

Participant #8 also expressed that it is not only important as a nontraditional student to have someone to talk to, but to also have someone that is non-biased and does not feel the need to judge. For the participants not having that outlet caused extreme stress for several of them. They all, to some degree, expressed how not having someone to talk to has discouraged them at some point. Participant #1 gives an extreme account of how the stress of not having an outlet or someone to talk to has manifested itself in her life: “I have been stressed out too much and I have gotten high blood pressure really bad and he has been saying that you’re gonna have to do something to release your stress, or you’re going to be in trouble.”

Participant #1’s account of how her stress was manifesting itself solidified the significance of how not having an outlet or someone to talk to could cause strain on the matriculations of the participants. What made her account even more significant was that she spoke candidly about the reason that she chose psychology as a major and that is because she is the counselor among her friends. She has deemed herself a Ph.D. because every one has historically come to her with their problems, but she is unable to go to them with hers.

Summary

The participants discussed feeling extremely disheartened by the institutional challenges that they faced. The majority of participants expressed feeling ostracized by the institution because the institution does not provide evening classes that are equivalent to the courses that are offered during the day. They further discussed feeling ostracized
due to their inability to participate in college activities. The participants also discussed that they felt they needed additional support during registration and advisement. They further discussed that they felt that they would benefit counseling services that were specific to nontraditional students.

**Dominant Theme: Financial Resource Factors**

Historically a student’s level of income has had a direct relationship to their ability to access a quality postsecondary education. For the studied participants income has played a significant role in their ability to continue their college educations. Most of the participants come from environments where financial resources were not readily available. They all discussed the challenges that they face as nontraditional students trying to attain a college degree. Nontraditional students are faced upon entrance into postsecondary institutions with the challenges of financial access, particularly because they do not qualify for varying types of financial assistance, namely Hope. The only Hope monies that nontraditional students qualify for are funds that are available to students that are pursuing vocational educations.

Conversely, nontraditional students are more likely to have to work and students that attend two-year institutions and have not completed a previous degree program are more likely than not to be employed at jobs that are lower paying jobs. Thus, nontraditional students’ ability to access institutions financially is significantly challenged by their lack of resources. The studied participants offered numerous accounts of how financial challenges have often either caused them not to persist or has contributed to their thoughts of not persisting. They are as follows: (a) Lack of tuition
and book assistance specific to nontraditional students, and (b) Limited income related issues (see Table 6).

Table 6

Financial Resource Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Lack of Tuition and Book Assistance Relative to Nontraditional Students</th>
<th>Limited Income-Related Issues</th>
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* An asterisk indicates that amount of times the theme is relative to the participant.

Emergent Themes: Lack of Tuition and Book Assistance Specific to Nontraditional Students

One of the most pressing issues for the participants was the fact that they felt overwhelmed by the fact that they were experiencing financial difficulties with paying for their college educations. They often expressed that they felt that the
financial assistance that was relative to nontraditional students was not plentiful enough to affectively assist them with their tuition and other college related expenses. Participant #1 offered her account as to how the lack of adequate financial resources has affected her matriculation.

I’m a nontraditional student’s with academic excellence and since I couldn’t get hope maybe there should be more means of me paying for school like grants made available that cater to nontraditional students. When you are nontraditional you have more things that you have to take care of. Just because you make a certain amount of money doesn’t mean you have it to throw it all over the place. I think there should be more perks to being a nontraditional student. I haven’t come out of my pocket per say, but I will eventually have to pay for this.

Participant #5 agreed in that she would like for more tuition and book vouchers to be made available specifically for nontraditional students. When asked how she felt about her financial resources, her response was, “I would love to be rich. I would like more scholarships. My books are more expensive than my tuition. I want more leeway with financial aid resources.” This particular population of students is in need of all of the financial assistance they can get because most of them are currently employed with companies that are paying them low wages due to their lack of education and it is most likely that even after attaining an associate’s degree their incomes will not significantly increase. Thus, financial vehicles that help them to continue their educations would be a plus.
Limited Income Related Issues

Many of the participants cited that they were experiencing tremendous issues with their financial stabilities. They spoke about the stress that they have to experience with the constant looming threat of not being able to financially manage the wellbeing of their families. There were several of the participants that agreed that they felt overwhelmed by the challenges that they faced regarding their lack of sustainable income. There were several participants that gave an account of their challenges. Participant #2 said:

My financial resources are shaky. Where I am I have made in the low twenties. I don’t feel like I can provide for my children like I would like to, and I don’t like where I live right now, but I can’t afford to do anything differently.

Her statement is significant because she speaks about how her financial situation has caused her great strain in her everyday life without the cost of her education. Thus, if the cost of her education is factored into her financial equation she will be in significantly more financial strain. Participant #3 added that she too is experiencing financial challenges. She expressed:

I wish I could get scholarships and grants if I knew what they were. I just wish I could afford to have everything taken care of, and would be able to pay. I don’t like people calling and saying that I owe anything.

Participant #3’s account is important because it exemplifies the feelings of the group in that she feels overwhelmed financially and wishes that there were additional financial vehicles to take some of the financial stress off of her. Participant #8 was an excellent example of how financial despair could the cause of having
nontraditional students consider leaving institutions without the attainment of a degree. During the focus group interview she discussed how she was about to be released from her job before the beginning of the new year, and that she was also at risk of being evicted because her landlord has not been paying her mortgage with the monies that she was providing him for rent. Since she has children then naturally the well being of her children is at the forefront. Her ability to maintain educational pursuits is secondary.

The challenges that participant one referenced are also challenges that many nontraditional students face. The inability to qualify for certain financial support because of income and age and the lack of knowledge about other grant monies have presently affected the financial status of many of the participants and threatens to cause issue for them in the future.

Summary

The participants cited that they found their financial situations to be insurmountable at times. They spoke about how the challenges that they faced have often caused them to consider discontinuing their educational pursuits. They further suggested that they felt because there were not a significant amount of financial vehicles available to nontraditional students in particular that they did not feel that they had the same access as their more traditional peers.
Dominant Theme: Peer Relationship Factors

According to Tinto (2006), student involvement is at the root of persistence for nontraditional students. He asserted that in order for students to persist that they would have to be engaged on some level. He further asserted that engagement is central to the college experience and is at the root of student success. He suggested that if engagement did not take place within the actual college environment, then it would most likely not take place outside of the college environment either.

The majority of the studied participants relayed that they did not have a relationship with their peers outside of the classroom. They mostly all seemed to be saddened by that fact, but concluded that they probably would not be developing a relationship with their peers outside of the classroom in the future either. The peer related perceptions of the participants were as follows: (a) Lack of involvement with peers outside of classroom, (b) Inability to relate to younger peers, and (c) Poor classroom interactions with peers (see Table 7).

Table 7
Peer Relationship Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Uninvolved With Peers Outside of Classroom</th>
<th>Inability to Relate to Younger Peers</th>
<th>Feel That Younger Students are Disrespectful</th>
<th>Poor Interactions With Peers Inside of the Classroom</th>
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* An asterisk is indicative of the relationship that the participants have to the theme

Emergent Themes: Lack of Involvement with Peers Outside of Classroom

The participants gave several accounts of how they were not involved with their peers outside of the classroom. They all laughed hysterically when they were asked the question: “Are you involved with your peers outside of the classroom environment?”

Participant #2 responded to the question by saying:

No, I keep to myself. In one class I got one phone number to call a classmate about an assignment. I never called because I was embarrassed about asking another student a question. It would be nice to have to be involved with other nontraditional students. One reason I haven’t gotten close to my peers is because in the past I’ve gotten negative nonverbal language from other people. I feel like other students may not appreciate my viewpoints and think that I’m weird. I love the way that my critical thinking teacher conducts her
class. An example is that we had a discussion about inferences and I realized that I wasn’t inferring correctly. I feel like I do the same in discussions. To save my feelings I keep to myself.

She was very self-critical in several of her statements. It is obvious that she does not have a really firm sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, her account of peer interactions may be significantly different than her peers and thus the need for their shared sentiment is important. Fortunately, several of the participants agreed with the fact that they are not interactive with their peers outside of the classroom and they offered their accounts. The majority of the other participants relayed that they are not familiar with their peers either, unless they are doing a class project that requires the solicitation of other group members. The only participants that held significant relationships with their peers were either the younger participants that took classes during the day hours, or the one participant that has a child that is pursuing a degree in conjunction with her. The remaining participants reported that they did not have a relationship with their peers.

*Inability to Relate to Younger Peers*

The overwhelming majority of the participants said that they can not relate to their younger peers. The premise behind this thought process was that because of their life’s experiences the participants better understood the value of pursuing a postsecondary education. The participants were very focused in their approach to their educations. The all had very grounded ideals about why they were pursuing a college degree, and had very little tolerance for their less focused and younger peers. All of the participants were asked how well they felt that their younger peers related to
nontraditional students and Participant #1 expressed her contempt for her younger peers by stating, “I find that a lot of them are disrespectful and that they don’t think about what they say before they say it.” Participant #2 shared a similar sentiment as participant #1 when she said, “They think we’re old. Since I’m coming at night I don’t deal with many. They don’t have a clue, they take college lightly. Nontraditional students take classes and school more seriously. I’ve only come across a few mature youngsters.” Participant #5 was very adamant and seemingly angry when she made the statement, “They don’t relate; we clash. I don’t feel like they understand the importance of what they’re doing. They lack respect.” The perspective that solidified the feelings of the participants was participant #7 account of the relationship of nontraditional students to their younger peers:

The younger students think totally different from us. They are so one sided. When I listen to them in class its crazy to hear way they think. It’s just crazy getting them to think, buts it’s hard for them because they are young. You can tell the students that have younger kids and the ones that have older kids by the comments they make.

The final account that contributed to the thoughts of the participants relative to their thoughts about their younger peers was Participant #8’s account:

They think were old and antiquated and they tell us that this is a new world and things have changed and I think that when they get older they will think as the older people, they are just immature right now.

The respect factor seemed to be really high on the participant’s list of priorities relative to peer to peer interactions. Of the participants that shared the thought process
that their younger peers are not as astute as they are in classroom settings, the majority
felt that the younger student's attitudes toward their educations were deterrents from the
participants getting adequate instruction as well.

Poor Classroom Interactions with Peers

The ability to interact in classroom environments is very important when
considering an affective matriculation for nontraditional students. Therefore the fact the
participants cited that they were experiencing poor classroom interactions with their
younger peers is significant when considering precursors for affective matriculations
relative to nontraditional students. Examples of poor peer interactions within the
classroom were apparent within the questions that were asked of the participants relative
to the peer related factors that they perceived as being a possible cause of stress and
damage towards their successful matriculations. For example participant #1 expressed
discontent with her classroom environment when she stated:

Some of the classes are so wild. For instance, my history class, that professor
didn't come back because he was so disturbed by the kids in class. And in
some respects he was right because some of the kids are out of control, and
as a matter of fact I was just in the library and one of my classmates from my
critical thinking class was saying that those students are just wild and out of
control. So, I have had a couple of instances where they were wild and out of
control. So, I have has a couple of instances where they were out of control,
but I have to tune all of that out because I am focused. I think that they
should be a little more serious and they have to realize that there are people
in here that are really serious about this. I think that well I know that I have met a lot of nontraditional students and they are paying out of pocket and that I think has a lot to do with whether you take this serious or not and if you don’t then you know that’s a loss out of your pocket. I had to really think about that myself when I was thinking about withdrawing and I had to think that I have spent a lot of money and what would I have to show for it, I mean I have more knowledge, but you’re still back to square one.

Participant #1 solidifies the affect that poor peer interactions in class have on nontraditional students. The participants also site that they have felt is some instances that they were ostracized from their younger peers. Participant #3 mentioned that she felt as if her peers were divisive and that they separated themselves into groups. Strangely the only time that the participant cited having a positive relationship with their peers were when they were in classes that were predominantly occupied by other nontraditional students.

Summary

The participants’ ability to relate to their peers is, according to Tinto (2002), extremely important when considering persistence. The participants acknowledged that they do not have relationships with their peers, and that the interactions that they do have are not always healthy interactions. The participants further suggested that the relationships that they have with their peers can often times be stressful and cause them to be annoyed. Therefore, according to Tinto (2002), if the relationships are not improved, they could quite possibly fail to persist.
Dominant Theme: Professor Relationship Factors

One of the most significant resources for nontraditional students is their professors. The sole reason that students generally enroll in postsecondary programs of study is to enhance their academic abilities. Therefore, it is imperative that nontraditional students and professors foster relationships that are positive. The participants indicated that the relationships that they have with the professors have been intricate in ensuring that they persist and in some instances have been the cause why they have considered not persisting.

DeJoy (1997) discusses the importance of understanding how to instruct a nontraditional student. He talks about the need for professors to understand the best conditions for instructing nontraditional students and they should have a grasp as to why this student has chosen to pursue a degree at this juncture in their lives. Understanding the nontraditional students’ reasoning for entrance and their needs and demographics, according to DeJoy, helps to foster and environment where the nontraditional student is comfortable and feels that they can learn.

The participants offer several scenarios of the relationships that they have experienced with their professors past and present, and while most of the accounts of their experiences were neutral, there were several relationships and experiences that should be revisited in order to ensure best practices for the nontraditional population of students. While the experiences were not always specific to something that the professor did per se, the experiences were ones that were the professor’s responsibility to handle.

For example, it was the responsibility of the professors to ensure that their classroom environments were conducive to learning for all students. Well, the
participants offer several accounts of how the environments were not conducive to learning in some instances, and unfortunately those instances were in large part due to the lack of control that the professors had on the behavior of the younger students. The participants also cited feeling that some of the professors did not have a respect for students in general, but particularly nontraditional students. They spoke about instances of where the professors were disrespectful in their behaviors toward them. The participants perceptions of the affects of professor relationships on their attrition rates are as follows: (a) Lack of classroom control, (b) Lack of professor respect for nontraditional students, and (c) Lack of comfort expressing themselves (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Professor Relationship Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Lack of Effective Classroom Control</th>
<th>Lack of Professor Respect for Nontraditional Students</th>
<th>Lack of Comfort Expressing Themselves in Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Lack of Effective Classroom Control</th>
<th>Lack of Professor Respect for Nontraditional Students</th>
<th>Lack of Comfort in Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* An asterisk indicates the relevance of the theme to the participants.

Emergent Themes: Lack of Classroom Control

A few of the participants cited that they did not feel that some of their professors adequately controlled their classrooms. They further cited that their professor’s lack of control was often the source of angst for them because they felt that they were trying to gain an education among peers that were more interested in being disruptive. There were a few that spoke out about the challenges that they felt they experienced in these unruly classroom environments. Participant #1 speaks about how she has had very good relationships with her professors in the past, but does not have an appreciation for the fact that some of them lack the ability to control their classrooms.

I think that my experiences have been pretty good. Maybe a couple of classes that were a little out of hand, but if I was the professor I would have told them to leave because you are distracting the other students. You know I think there is a time for horse play and everything has its place.

Participant #1’s recollection of her experience in her classroom was just one of the many instances where the participants cited that the younger students were causing
them to be distracted and they felt that the professors should be managing their classrooms better. Participant #1 offered an additional experience where she was taking an exam with a professor and she said the professor just allowed the students to have full reign of the classroom. She said they were just loud and obnoxious and the she said that she wised that her professors would have some guidelines for their classes. While participant #1 spoke about the classroom experiences that she had that she felt were disheveled.

*Lack of Professor Respect for Nontraditional Students*

Participant #5 spoke about how she felt the professors could be more respectful of nontraditional students. She felt that she be able to manage her education, and that professors should be more understanding of students that are nontraditional and give them the needed leeway. She said that one of the things that she could not stand was when professors questioned her tardiness or asked her excessive questions about why she may have been absent from classes. Her belief was that because she was an adult, she should be held accountable for her education and not treated like a child.

I know that I’m here to get my education. I’m paying for it, it’s not free. It’s not like I’m in public school. So, I don’t need for you to point out just because you don’t know what’s going on. Yes if I feel like it let me go to you and let you know. Nine times out of 10, if I want to go to you and let you know. Nine times out of 10, if I want to go to you and let you know what’s going on then that’s my choice. So, me coming in late I’m not being disrespectful to you class, I’m here I could have said since I’m going to be late then I just will not come at all. There is one class in particular that I
can think of. If I need to leave early the class is already disruptive and if I need to leave and walk out then I have something that I need to do. Then, don’t question me. That’s one of my biggest problems.

Participant #5 was basically reiterating her thoughts about how she felt professors should treat older students. She said and most participants agreed that the professors at the studied institution are sometimes too lenient on the students and they do not always hold them accountable for their own actions. She further stated that she has gone to another two-year institution in the past and they gave her complete autonomy to manage her own education.

*Lack of Comfort Expressing Themselves*

A few of the participants further assessed that the problems that they have with their classes is that they often do not feel comfortable expressing themselves. The problem that they were having mostly was an issue of feeling uncomfortable with themselves. The issue was more about their being afraid that they would be judged or that they had possibly been out of the educational arena for so long that they would not be able to function affectively. A few of the participants spoke about not being an expressive person and how they found it challenging to speak up in front of other students and the professors. Participant #1 said:

In some classes I’m not a real expressive person in classes. I’m trying to come out more with that, but I don’t speak well in front of others, but some professors have that as a part of your grade. In my human communications
class, I thought that I would have a heart attack because I had to get in front of the class.

Half of the participants agreed that they felt uncomfortable speaking in front of the class for fear of seeming like they lacked what it takes to be in school.

Summary

Throughout the chapter, the data were presented by putting the premise behind the dominant theme into context, then using a quote to support the theme, and finally analyzing the relevance of the participants’ perception to the espoused theme. The dominant themes were the foundation of the research questions, thus the presentation of the dominant themes were presented in the same chronological order as the research questions.

The body of the presented data had its foundation in the experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of the participants. The wealth of data was presented in its raw form in order to show a concise example of the perceptions of the participants relative to their matriculation experiences and needs. The use of the raw data was done in order to present the participants in the best possible light, by using their own words.

The relationship between the data sources and the dominant and emergent themes are presented in tables. The tables are presented in order of their dominant theme relationship. Immediately following the tables is a brief explanation of the relationships that are shown within the tables.
Table 9 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, personal relationship factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes.

Table 9

Data Source for Dominant Theme—Personal Relationship Factors—and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Theme: Personal Relationship Factors</th>
<th>Qualifying Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Themes:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of social interactions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of spousal support</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of family support</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of coworker support</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualifying questionnaire provided initial information on the personal life factors of the participants, and the remaining and more in-depth information was found within the interviews and the focus group. The emergent themes under the dominant theme of personal factors were found within the interview and focus group data, respectively.

Table 10 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, professional factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes.
Table 10

*Data Source for Dominant Theme—Professional Factors—and Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifying Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dominant Theme:</strong> Professional Factors</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent Themes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects of being sole household provider</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects of high job demands</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree utility and relationship to success</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The basic information regarding the relationship of professional factors to the participants was brought forth during the initial questionnaire. The remaining information regarding the dominant theme professional factor was found throughout the interview and focus group data. The data that emerged within the dominant theme, professional factors, was found in either or both the interview and focus group.

Table 11 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, academic preparation, emerged. An "X" indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes. The data that emerged regarding the dominant theme academic preparation was found throughout the three data sources. The information that was found within the qualifying survey provided the foundation for the information that would emerge regarding academic preparation throughout the interview and the focus group. The emergent themes for academic preparation were found mostly within the one-on-one interviews, but were also found within the focus group data.
Table 11

**Data Source for Dominant Theme—Academic Preparation—and Emergent Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Theme: Academic Preparation</th>
<th>Qualifying Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extended time out of high school</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of academic preparedness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No college preparatory classes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No strong academic influence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial course placement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, Institutional Factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes. The information regarding the dominant theme, institutional factors, that was found within the qualifying survey was very basic and only referenced such information as current status, time out of institution, initial enrollment year, and reason for institutional choice. The emergent themes and the relative data that was found regarding institutional factors were found throughout the interview and the focus group.
Table 12

*Data Source for Dominant Theme—Institutional Factors—and Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qualifying</th>
<th></th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dominant Theme:</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Emergent Themes:**

- Lack of evening services  
  X X X
- Inability to participate in college activities  
  X
- Availability of evening courses  
  X X
- Adjustment issues and lack of administrative support  
  X X
- Need for nontraditional student-specific counseling  
  X

Table 13 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, financial resource factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes. The dominant theme, financial resource factors, was brought forth during the interview and throughout the focus group. The participants had significant dialogue regarding financial resource factors throughout both the interview and focus group as well.
Table 13

*Data Source for Dominant Theme—Financial Resource Factors—and Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifying</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Dominant Theme:* Financial Resource Factors

*Emergent Themes:*

- Lack of tuition and book assistance relative to nontraditional students
  - X X
- Limited income-related issues
  - X X

Table 14 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, peer relationship factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes.

Table 14

*Data Source for Dominant Theme—Peer Relationship Factors—and Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifying</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Dominant Theme:* Peer Relationship Factors

*Emergent Themes:*

- Uninvolved with peers outside of classroom
  - X X X
- Inability to relate to younger peers
  - X X
- Feels younger students are disrespectful
  - X X
- Poor interaction with peers inside of classroom
  - X X
The dominant theme, peer relationship factors, had its foundation in the qualifying survey. The theme was also strongly found throughout the interview and the focus group data. The emergent themes relative to peer relationships were found holistically within the interview and focus group data, respectively.

Table 15 provides the data source from which the dominant theme, professor relationship factors, emerged. An “X” indicates the relevant data source for emergent themes. There was a single question relative to the dominant theme professor’s relationship factors within the initial questionnaire. The question was significant because it was the basis for participant thought on their relationships with their professors. The dominant theme of professor relationships was also apparent throughout the interview and the focus group. However, the emergent themes were most apparent within the data relative to the focus group.

Table 15

Data Source for Dominant Theme—Professor Relationship Factors—and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Theme: Professor Relationship Factors</th>
<th>Qualifying Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Emergent Themes:

Lack of classroom control

Lack of professor respect for nontraditional students

Lack of comfort expressing themselves in classes
CHAPTER VI
FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is organized according to the following sections: Findings, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions. The findings addressed seven research questions. The seven research questions espoused several dominant themes: personal perceptions, professional perceptions, academic preparation perceptions, institutional perception factors, financial resource perceptions, peer relationship perceptions, and professor relationship perceptions. There were themes that emerged within the data relative to the dominant themes and the data sector for that particular theme. The findings are presented in order of the dominant themes and subsequently the emergent themes as seen through the lens of black feminist theory and Tinto's (1993) Theory of Persistence.

Findings

Dominant Theme: Personal Factors

This researcher felt convinced that throughout the raw data that there was a relationship between the perceptions of personal life issues and the attrition rates of nontraditional students. Many of the participants cited personal life challenges as the reasons that they have not persisted in the past. They also cited personal challenges and expectations as possible contributors to their lack of persistence in the future. It was revealed throughout the data that the participants’ personal lives quite significantly

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influenced their academic pursuits. This ideal was most noted throughout the data within their perceptions of the effects of their personal lives on their persistence.

According the hooks (1981), the black woman has always had to endure the challenges of existing in a world that did not take into account her needs, but that placed its pressures at her feet. Of the challenges that were displayed throughout the data relative to the participants, they have a tremendous amount of worldly pressures at their feet. Therefore, for some the completion of a postsecondary education seems unyielding. Throughout the data there were themes within the dominant themes that continued to emerge relative to the personal life perceptions of the participants. Those themes were significant because they provided an understanding of the participants’ perceptions of the factors that contributed to their attrition rates within the studied institution. In order to ensure effective understanding, the emergent themes were displayed immediately following the dominant themes to solidify their significance. However, they are presented in order of their relationship to the dominant themes.

Emergent Themes

Within the dominant theme, personal factors, there were several emergent themes that continued to be present throughout the data. The participants discussed various precursors that led to their inability to persist in the past, and several factors that could quite easily affect their future ability to persist: lack of social interactions, lack of spousal support, lack of family support, lack of personal focus, and lack of coworker support. The findings were as follows:
1. **Lack of social interactions:** The consensus among the participants was that there was a relationship between the effects of not having a social life and their persistence. The majority of the participants cited that they were not happy with the fact that they were not experiencing what they felt were quality social interactions. Those interactions for most of the participants were relative to the interactions they felt they should be experiencing from the opposite sex.

2. **Lack spousal support:** There were a few participants that expressed that the relationship they had in the past with former spouses significantly effected their decision to discontinue their pursuit of a postsecondary education. One participant cited that her husband’s lack of involvement with their children has caused her a great deal of stress and subsequently has caused her to think of discontinuing her degree pursuit.

3. **Lack of family support:** The findings definitely revealed that there is a correlation between the lack of family support and the attainment of a degree for nontraditional African-American female students. The students felt that the lack of family support was an additional stressor because they did not have the network they needed to support their pursuits.

4. **Lack of personal focus:** The lack of personal focus was present within the dialogues of the participants. They gave accounts of how they felt their own thoughts and beliefs about their abilities quite frequently caused them to think about discontinuing their pursuit of a degree program at varying times in their college career.
5. **Lack of coworker support**: While the lack of coworker support may have seemed to be irrelevant when discussing the participants’ personal perceptions of the affects of their personal issues on their degree attainment, the effects of coworkers on the participants’ collegiate matriculations were quite significant. The participants often viewed their co-workers as having the capability to be empathetic, but in most instances not offering empathy.

*Summary*

The findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between the emergent themes under the dominant theme personal factors and the participant’s perceptions of why they have not persisted and could quite possibly not persist in the future. The participants stressed the individual reasons why they felt they were challenged personally such as: lack of social interactions, lack of spousal support, lack of family support, lack of personal focus, and lack of co-worker support. The aforementioned factors for the participants significantly affected their persistence.

**Dominant Theme: Professional factors**

The participants were all working-class individuals and expressed that they would not have considered themselves as having experienced real career success. The participants asserted that their lack of career success was relative to their lack of a secondary education. They also mentioned that they were employed in positions that lacked advancement capabilities, but that they had to remain at their jobs because their jobs were their sole financial resource. Thus, maintaining their sub standard employment was significant for the participants, and the interplay of the responsibilities they carried
relative to their employment was often perceived as a possible deterrent to their persistence.

Historically, black feminist have shown how African-American women have been marginalized (hooks, 1981). The participants have discussed varying manners in which they have experienced marginalization within their employment and employability. They often mentioned how they have been over looked because of their race for less qualified individuals, and how their pay is often the lowest within their companies. Hooks (1981) says it eloquently when she spoke about how black women have been marginalized as far back as slavery, when she said, “Although black female slaves often boasted of their work ability, they longed to be treated with the same regard and consideration they believed was due as a woman’s privilege in patriarchal society” (p. 48).

The findings revealed that the participants definitely felt the affects of professional factors when considering their persistence at the studied institution. Three emergent factors became most apparent throughout the data, and those factors were: the affects of being the sole household provider, the affects of highly demanding low paying jobs, and their perceptions of the utility of their degrees once they completed them.

**Emergent Themes**

The data presented several emergent themes relative to the participants’ perceptions of the relationship that their professional experiences have had on their persistence. It was found that the themes that emerged significantly affected the attrition rates of the participants. There were three emergent themes that were found to be most
relative to the participants: the effects of being the sole household provider, the effects of highly demanding low paying jobs, and their perceptions of professional degree utility.

The explanation of those themes is as follows:

1. *The effects of being the sole household provider:* The study found that being the sole household provider caused the participants to experience extreme instances of stress. The participants discussed how they felt the stress was overwhelming and because the financial stability and livelihood of their families was most important, they have often contemplated discontinuing their educations.

2. *The effects of a highly demanding low paying job:* The study revealed that of the participants that were employed, all were in jobs that were menial. The findings also revealed that the participants were experiencing high levels of work without yielding sufficient financial outcomes. Thus, the participants cited that they felt highly stressed and had often thought of discontinuing their degree pursuit because of the conflict that they were having between their jobs and school.

3. *Degree utility and relationship to success:* The findings revealed that the participants did not have a firm understanding of the utility of their degrees. They expressed that they often thought about the things that they could be pursuing that could possibly yield an immediate outcome, instead of taking the route of continuing their degree pursuits. Especially since they were unsure as to the financial outcomes of their attainment of a degree.
Summary

The findings revealed that the participants’ professional life significantly affected their pursuit of a postsecondary education. Factors such as being the sole household provider and the need to sustain their families heavily weighed on the participants perceptions of the relevance of school in relationship to their family lives. Hooks (1981) discussed how African-American women have had to consistently be everything to their families since slavery. They have always had to handle extreme pressure and in the instances of the participants this pattern was consistent. The participants discussed how the extreme demand of their jobs affected the feasibility of their persisting. Finally, their ability to use their degrees once they received them and thoughts of what they could be doing instead of pursuing a degree often plagued the participants.

Dominant Theme: Academic Preparation

The majority of the participants asserted that they did not feel that they had previously been academically prepared for college. They spoke about varying challenges that they experienced while they were in their secondary education environments. They elaborated on the academic challenges that they felt would cause them to feel as if they would be incapable of pursuing a postsecondary education, and most were agitated by that thought. There seemed to be an undercurrent for the participants that exemplified the sentiment of Sojourner Truths with her infamous comment “Aint I a woman” (Hooks, 1981), and the nontraditional student basis for the reference is, “Why is it that I have not been afforded the same academic consideration as my contemporaries? Aren’t I also a
student?” There seemed to be the belief by the participants that they were 10 steps behind before they even began their academic careers.

Most of the participants came to the studied institution feeling insecure about their academic abilities, and expressed factors relative to academics that they felt had been or that could be prohibitory to their success. The factors that they discussed that could be possible deterrents to their completion of their degree programs are: experiencing extended time out of high school, inadequate preparation academically, the lack of college preparatory curriculum, the lack of a strong academic influence, and the need and affect by most of taking college mandated remedial courses.

Emergent Themes

The majority of the participants admitted that they did not feel adequately prepared academically. The participants cited several factors that contributed to their feelings of inadequacy relative to their academic preparedness. The themes that most affected the participants were:

1. *Extended time out of high school:* The study revealed that the participants that had been out of high school for extended periods of time were likely to feel overwhelmed by entering an academic environment after such and extended period of time. The study further revealed that the participants that had been out of high school the longest experienced more significant anxiety during their matriculations.

2. *Lack of academic preparedness:* The findings revealed that the majority of the students felt that they were not academically prepared enough to attend a
postsecondary institution. The participants cited obvious anxiety relative to their lack of academic preparedness.

3. *Lack of college preparatory track:* The study revealed that the majority of the participants were not on a college preparatory track in high school. Therefore, they did not have an understanding of the type of curriculum that they would be undertaking once they entered a collegiate environment.

4. *Lack of academic influence:* The findings revealed that several of the participants did not feel that they had an adequate academic influence. Most participants felt that their parents as well as other family members were not astute enough academically in order to provide an adequate academic influence.

5. *The need for remedial courses:* The participants were found to feel a sense of shame relative to having to undergo remedial courses. Especially those participants that did not exit out of their remedial course during their first attempts. There was also a participant that was forced to sit out for several years because she was unable to exit her remedial course. She expressed feeling that she had been defeated, but later decided to meet her challenge and return after the specified time that she was asked to sit out.

*Summary*

The lack of academic preparedness was found to have a significant affect on the participants’ perceptions of their place in an academic environment. They cited several reasons why they felt stressed often times due to their lack of preparedness. They further
displayed in the raw data the affects that not being adequately prepared academically was having on their desire to continue their pursuit of a degree.

**Dominant Theme: Institutional Factors**

Aside from the student the institution holds an undisputable responsibility to provide academically and socially engaging environments for the students that they enroll. The study revealed that the institution that was studied has not always provided services that were aligned with the matriculation needs of their most served population, nontraditional African-American female students. The study further revealed that the participants' perceptions of the factors that contributed to the issues that they experienced within the institution were: the lack of administrative services available to evening students, the inability of evening students to participate in student related activities, the lack of availability of classes that are available to evening students, the lack of support for adjustment issues that nontraditional students are known to have, and the need for counseling specific to nontraditional students.

**Emergent Themes**

There were several themes that emerged relative to the participants perceptions of how the institution itself has affected their attrition rates. They discussed a myriad of instances that they felt were worth considerable mention throughout the data. However, there were several that continuously emerged. There was a serious underpinning to the participant's revelation of their frequent feelings of ostracism and that was that they were not being holistically considered as true participatory college students within this institution. Thus, this lack of holistic concern was, according to Tinto (2006), a precursor
for their lack of persisting and their possible contribution to the college’s attrition rate. Tinto plainly states that those students that are not actively engaged and feel as if they have been considered in all aspects of college planning be it student activities or curriculum planning are less likely to persist than those that feel they have been holistically considered. As a result of the data the following are the emergent themes:

1. *Lack of college wide evening services to students:* The findings revealed that the participants felt significant disdain with the fact that most of the college wide services that were available to the student body were not available to evening students.

2. *Inability to participate in college activities:* The participants were largely evening students and felt that they were ostracized as participatory members within the college environment. They felt that in some instances they were excluded from the activities because the activities were not available to evening students.

3. *Availability of evening classes:* The study revealed that the participants felt that they did not get the same opportunity relative to course selection as the day time students. They felt that being unable to have the same ability to select courses was unfair and exclusive of nontraditional evening students.

4. *Adjustment issues and lack of administrative support:* The study revealed that the participants experienced anxiety relative to matriculating successfully after having been out of school for long periods of time, as well as having never been in a college environment.
5. *Need for nontraditional student specific counseling*: The findings revealed that the participants often cited needing counseling specific to nontraditional students. They often experience a unique set of needs relative to their specific population and felt that having counselors that understood the specific needs of nontraditional students would be beneficial.

*Summary*

It is supported by the data that the participants feel that they do not experience the same level of institutional support and effort as their more traditional peers. They discussed how it is their desire that the services and classes that are offered to students that attend classes during the day will be offered to evening students. They also mentioned that they felt like nontraditional students could benefit from having various counselors that were specific to nontraditional students.

*Dominant Theme: Financial Resource Factors*

The study revealed that the population of students that the studied institution enrolls is more likely to be first generation nontraditional African-American students that lack the financial resources that they need in order to matriculate successfully. The study further revealed that the financial strain the participants experienced has often caused the participants to think of discontinuing their pursuit of a college education. A few of the participants spoke of how they were disheartened with the fact that there was not a tremendous amount of financial vehicles available to nontraditional students. They talked about the unfairness of having the same needs as more traditional students financially, but having the inability to have the same financial access.
The participants also spoke about how they often felt overwhelmed by the financial responsibilities that they experienced outside of their college pursuits, and how those responsibilities have often affected their perceptions of whether or not they would be able to continue their degree programs.

**Emergent Themes**

A couple of tremendously affecting themes were found within the data relative to the participants perceptions of the financial resources that were available to them. They often discussed how they felt significantly overwhelmed financially and that their financial status has and could cause them not to persist. The emergent themes were:

(a) lack of tuition and book assistance relative to nontraditional students, and (b) lack of income related issues and the explanation is as follows:

1. *Lack of tuition and book assistance relative to nontraditional students*: The study revealed that the participants felt disheartened by the fact that they were not made aware of the financial vehicles that were specific to nontraditional students, and that there were more financial vehicles available to their more traditional peers.

2. *Limited income related issues*: The findings revealed that the participants were significantly challenged by their lack of income and that they often considered or have not persisted due to the financial challenges that they face.

**Summary**

The findings revealed that the challenges that the participants faced relative to finances were often seemingly insurmountable to them and had frequently caused them to
either not persist or to consider not persisting. They discussed how they felt it was challenging for them having the responsibilities of a nontraditional student without the necessary financial resources. The findings further revealed that the participants felt ostracized again due to the lack of financial vehicles that were made available to nontraditional students and that more financial vehicles that are specific to nontraditional students should be made available.

**Dominant Theme: Peer Relationship Factors**

The findings revealed that the students were not adequately involved with their peers in a manner that would be conducive to getting the true benefits of being a college student. The studied participants revealed that they did not have a relationship with their peers and that they often felt that they lacked any commonalities with their peers that were younger. They further stated that they have found the interactions that they have had with their younger peers to be disheartening. As asserted earlier, Tinto (2002) theorized that student engagement was a significant indicator of the persistence of nontraditional students. He further asserted that those students that do not persist are those that are not holistically involved in the academic and social cultures of their institutions. Therefore, because the participants cited that they were not holistically engaged then it would be most likely that they would not persist, or experience challenges persisting.

**Emergent Themes**

The findings revealed that the participants did not have significant interactions with their peers. The findings also revealed that the participants often viewed their
younger peers as disruptive, disrespectful, and not easily relatable. The areas that emerged most frequently throughout the data are as follows:

1. *Lack of involvement with their peers outside of the classroom:* The participants stated that because of time constraints and the feasibility of peer relationships in conjunction with the other happenings of their lives that they were unable to foster engaging relationships with their peers, particularly their younger peers.

2. *Lack of ability to relate to their younger peers:* The participants stated in the data that they were not able to garner positive relationships with their younger peers because of their inability to relate to their younger peers due to the gap in life experiences and the value that nontraditional students place on their college careers.

3. *The participants felt that the younger peers were disrespectful in their behaviors:* The findings revealed that the majority of the participants considered their more traditional peers to be disrespectful in varying degrees. They felt that their younger peers did not have respect for the importance of pursuing a college degree, nor did they have respect for their older peers.

4. *Poor classroom interactions with their younger peers:* The findings revealed that the participants often experienced a disconnection with their younger peers within the classroom setting. They discussed how they felt disheartened by the fact that their younger peers were often disruptive in classes and how they felt disgusted by how they sometimes didn’t seem to have a respect for the learning environment.
Summary

The study revealed that nontraditional students do not often have relationships outside of the classroom with their peers, particularly their more traditional peers. The study further revealed that nontraditional students often felt that their more traditional peers were not easily relatable, due to age differences and their younger peers varying levels of respect for the institution of education. The study further revealed that their more traditional peers could be disrespectful and that they were not easy to get along with at times inside of the classroom.

Dominant Theme: Professor Relationship Factors

It was found through the participant data that the professors at the studied institution did not generally have negative attitudes towards the participants, but more a few negative occurrences that the participants felt were worth discussing, and worth rectifying for future students. The participants suggested that some of the professors lacked control over their classroom environments and because most of the participants felt that they were really grounded in their pursuit of an education, they could not understand the professors allowing the disruptive nature of their more traditional peers. The participants also discussed how they felt that because of their ages they should be respected as a peer age wise with their professors. This thought process was grounded in the premise that nontraditional students matriculate differently than their more traditional peers and thus the treatment from their professors should reflect the validity of their age.

Additionally, a few of the participants cited that they felt uncomfortable in classes expressing their opinions. For the participants that expressed this sentiment, it was more
an issue of personal self-esteem than it was a professor interaction issue. Therefore, the
evidence of the professors' affect on the attrition rates of nontraditional African-
American female students was not conclusive enough to say that the professors have a
tremendous role in the attrition rates of nontraditional African-American female students.
Again, the study revealed that there were some isolated incidences and some significant
attitude adjustments on the part of some professors that could contribute to the attrition
rates of nontraditional African-American female students.

Emergent Themes

There were a few themes that were found to be relevant when considering the
participants' perceptions of professor relationships to their persistence. The participants
discussed how they did not perceive that their relationships with their professors were
holistically the cause of their thoughts of not persisting, but felt that at times the
relationships that they had while in the presence of their professors significantly affected
their outlook on continuing their matriculations. The following are the emergent themes
that occurred throughout the data relevant to the participants' perception of professor
relationships: (a) lack of classroom control, (b) lack of professor respect for
nontraditional students, and (c) lack of comfort expressing themselves in classes.

1. *Lack of classroom control*: The study revealed that often the participants felt
that the professors did not have adequate control over their classroom
environments. They further felt that it was the behavior of their younger peers
that caused them to feel that they were not getting the most out of their
classroom experiences.
2. *Lack of professor respect for nontraditional students:* It was found that a few of the participants did not feel that their professors had age appropriate respect for them as peers. They cited feeling like the professors treated them as if they were more traditional students that did not have their level of life related responsibility.

3. *Lack of comfort in class expressing themselves:* The findings revealed that because a few of the participants had been out of high school for extended periods of time that they were in some instances uncomfortable with expressing themselves in classroom settings. They cited that they were unsure of their abilities and felt that the professors could have been a little more understanding about their needs relative to feeling comfortable as nontraditional students.

*Summary*

The study revealed that the participants did not have a tremendous amount of challenges directly with the professors, but that the challenges that they experienced were more in line with what the professors were not doing. For instance, the participants felt that the professors did not have adequate control over their classrooms in some instances, and that in some instances they did not show the respect for them as nontraditional students that they felt they deserved. Finally, in some classroom setting the participants felt uncomfortable expressing them selves and felt that the professors could have been more understanding of the challenges they face as nontraditional students that have spent significant time out of academic environments.
Implications

The findings of this study dictated the following implications relative to the participant’s perceptions of the factors that have or could contribute to their contribution to the attrition rates of the studied institution:

1. Nontraditional students were found to be less engaged socially than their more traditional peers. Their lack of engagement could contribute to increased attrition.

2. Nontraditional students were found to have family issues that caused challenges with their matriculations. Institutions that do not take into account the holistic student when servicing populations such as nontraditional student populations could find themselves losing this population of students to more nontraditional student friendly institutions.

3. Students that have been out of high school for a lengthy period of time without transitional counseling prior to entering their postsecondary institution of choice could experience issues with their self-efficacy and decide to leave without the attainment of their degree.

4. Nontraditional students were found to have low paying jobs that are highly demanding. Institutions could lose students to attrition in instances where students have jobs that are highly demanding.

5. Nontraditional students indicate that they do not have a firm understanding of the utility of their degrees. The lack of knowledge of the utility of their degrees could cause students to become discouraged about persisting.
6. It is imperative to the success of nontraditional students to transition into a campus environment that is conducive to the needs of nontraditional students. Without a smooth transition nontraditional students have been found to get overwhelmed by college campuses and leave without the attainment of a degree.

7. Based on the participant’s acknowledgement of their lack of academic preparedness, without the institutions official assistance with getting nontraditional students up to the standards of college related curriculum, students could very easily get overwhelmed and fail to persist.

8. Most of the participants stated that they have not had a viable academic influence. Based on that knowledge, without a school instituted mentor that could further influence them academically, nontraditional students could fail to persist, or take longer to graduate.

9. Evening administrative services are not consistently available to nontraditional students and they most often attend classes and require administrative services at night. The implication is that without the availability of evening classes, nontraditional students that rely on evening classes will fail to persist, or take longer to graduate.

10. The lack of nontraditional student engagement inside and outside of the institution was found across the spectrum of the studied group of nontraditional students. Due to the lack of participation within the institution’s student related activities nontraditional students could begin to feel alienated from the institution and fail to persist.
11. Nontraditional students report that their access to education has been affected due to the lack of grants and other financial vehicles available to nontraditional students. This fact could significantly impede or prohibit their degree completion.

12. The stringent restrictions of the Hope scholarship disallowing students that graduated from high school before 1993 to receive the Hope scholarship could discourage viable students that absent of their high school graduation year would otherwise receive the monies.

13. There have been documented correlations of the relationship of peer to peer interactions and persistence. Nontraditional students site often that they do not have relationships with their peers outside of the classroom. The implications are that the nontraditional student could feel less a part of the overall academic and social environment of the institution and fail to persist.

14. Nontraditional students have cited that more traditional students do not behave as if they are serious about pursuing a college degree while on campus. Nontraditional students could decide to go to other institutions where students are forced to act accordingly and thus affect the attrition of the studied institution.

15. Without the benefit of classroom policies relative to behavior nontraditional students could decide to attend colleges with stronger policies relative to the behavior of students in classes.
16. Without effective guidance, advisement, and counseling, nontraditional students could fail to persist, graduate in a timely manner, or they may decide to attend a more nontraditional student centered institution.

Recommendations for Practice

The recommendations for practice are organized into two broad areas: Academic Affairs and Student Affairs The recommendations for academic administration are:

1. Provide more evening classes with the same course selection as the courses that are offered during the day;
2. Provide academic support services specific to students that have been out of high school for extended periods of time;
3. Provide transitional counseling specific to nontraditional students;
4. Ensure that all faculty and academic advisors are trained extensively on the academic needs of nontraditional students;
5. Students that have been out of academic environments for extended periods of time should be provided transitional counseling that helps them to become re-acclimated to academic environments;
6. As a result of the findings a recommendation would be for more workshops, some examples of needed workshops would include: understanding the academic needs of the nontraditional student, understanding the instructional needs of the nontraditional student, and how to give and receive respect in the classroom with students that are your age;
7. Additional recommendations would be that administration mandate workshops for staff on the benefits of customer service, and giving students the respect that you feel you deserve;

8. To ensure student academic preparedness relationships with the feeder high schools specifically should be fostered in order to ensure that the academic foundation that students receive in their high school environments are indicative of the requirements that they will have to meet academically for their college academic environments.

Recommendations for Practice for Student Affairs

1. Ensure the engagement of nontraditional students by establishing effective measures to get them involved.

2. Provide training for the office of counseling specific to the needs and possible stressors of nontraditional students.

3. All personnel that are hired and that are current employees should have knowledge or be trained on the specific counseling needs of nontraditional students.

4. Also, since the office of financial aid reports directly to the office of student affairs, then that office should ensure that the office of financial aid is trained on the various financial vehicles relative to nontraditional students, specifically scholarship vehicles.

5. Under the division of student affairs there should be affective career guidance for nontraditional students because their needs for immediate placement are
more pressing than their more traditional peers. They should also be given early guidance regarding their degree utility and the financial gains they can expect relative to their programs of study.

6. Additionally, during orientation nontraditional students should be assigned a nontraditional student specific mentor that can help them with their unique matriculation needs.

7. Nontraditional students should also have a network and support groups devised that is specifically for nontraditional students where they can meet and discuss their needs and similarities.

8. The student affairs division should also ensure that the policies and procedures relative to the behavior of students be enforced affectively.

9. Nontraditional students could also benefit from relative workshops such as: budgeting, Healthy relationships, study skills, time management, and stress management.

10. Finally, the activities that are campus-wide should be made available to evening students, subsequently nontraditional students.

Recommendations for Policy

1. It is recommended that the institution bring about policy that mandates that the course offerings that are provided for the day students are universally offered for the evening students.

2. It is also recommended that nontraditional students are assigned academic advisors that specifically understands the challenges that nontraditional
students face and that all academic advisors be made aware of the challenges that nontraditional students face and given a guided understanding of how to facilitate advisement for nontraditional students.

3. There should be a strong partnership formulated between the secondary feeder school counselors and the postsecondary school counselors. This relationship would further ensure the successful transition of the students from one institution to the next.

4. It is further recommended that because nontraditional students are often pressed for time that courses should be offered in cohorts where students that qualify are able to participate in accelerated courses that span a shorter period of time than the already offered courses.

5. The Hope scholarship policy should be revised to exclude the graduation year requirement in order to ensure financial access to all students that qualify otherwise.

6. It is finally recommended that students that have children should be afforded the luxury of an on site or near site daycare facility where the cost could be an addendum to their tuition.

Recommendation for Research

Further research is definitely needed that explores a more in depth study of the matriculation needs of the nontraditional African-American female students. The current body of research does not exemplify the magnitude of the need for studies specific to this population of student. The contribution of more research relative to nontraditional
African-American female students could contribute to the legacy of expanding knowledge for this population of students. This knowledge base is important because African-American nontraditional female students are entering institutions of higher learning at increasing rates, but they are failing to persist.

This study attempted to gather a true understanding of the perceptions of what nontraditional African-American female students face relative to their matriculation needs, but was limited to a very small population of students. The body of research for nontraditional students could benefit from studying nontraditional students at various institutions. Also, there are many more institutions that enroll a high percentage of nontraditional students, and those institutions were not included within the study. The study was done on a small college campus. Therefore, it is determined that this body of research should be used as a foundation for studies that will be done in the future relative to nontraditional African-American female students. Further studies on the matriculations of nontraditional students at four year institutions compared to nontraditional students at two-year institutions would also be helpful in understanding the nontraditional student’s needs relative to the type of institution that they are entering. The findings of this study further solidified the need to devise independent studies relative to the dominant themes espoused within this body of research.

Also, there should be further research done on the relationship of varying urban secondary institutions and the academic outcomes of their students once they enter postsecondary institutions. This study should be longitudinal. Further research should also be done on the outcomes of fostering collaborative relationships between secondary and postsecondary institutions and the student outcomes.
Conclusions

This study examined 10 nontraditional women at a small two year institution. The study illuminated the challenges that these women faced as they matriculated and explored personal, professional, academic, institutional, financial resource, peer relationship, and professor relationship factors that they perceive could and has affected their attrition rates.

The findings emerged from a host of dominant themes that were generalized at the inception of the study. The participants mostly provided a clear understanding of their perceptions relative to the themes. Therefore, the participants’ responses provide an understanding of the relationships that the themes do or do not have to the participants’ contribution to the studied institution’s attrition rates.

The implications drew upon the research to bring forth a cause and effect understanding of the findings that if heeded could assist in decreasing the attrition rates for African-American female students. The recommendations were brought forth in an effort to provide a guiding post for future practices, policies, and research relative to understanding and adhering to the needs of nontraditional African-American female students.
APPENDIX A

Qualifying Survey

Potential Participant: ____________________________________________

Name: _________________________________________________________

Number: _________________________________________________________

Address: _________________________________________________________

Identification #: ________________________________________________

All information that you provide will be held as confidential and will only be seen by the researcher. If asked to participate in this study you will receive further confidentiality information. Thank you for your time. Your participation could help the futures of you and your fellow students.

Please answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Have you been a student at this institution before and left for any reason?
   (a) Yes _____  (b) No _____

2. If you have left this institution for any reason how long did you remain gone?
   (a) 1-5 years _____  (b) 6-10 years _____  (c) 11+ years _____

3. When you left, did you expect to return? Yes _____ No _____ If so explain?
   ____________________________

4. How many semesters did you attend previously? _____________________________

5. What was your academic standing when you left?
   (a) Good _____  (b) Warning _____  (c) Probation _____
Appendix A (continued)

6. What is your current academic standing?
   (a) Good _____  (b) Warning _____  (c) Probation _____

7. Have you ever been suspended for poor academic standing?
   (a) Yes _____  (b) No _____

8. Did you get involved outside of the classroom with your peers? ________________

9. How would you describe the relationship you had/have with you your professors?
   ______________________________________________________________________

10. How would you describe your academic status as a student before entering this institution?
    (a) Great _____  (b) Good _____  (c) Average _____  (d) Poor _____

11. When did you first seek enrollment at this institution? Please specify a year.
    ______________________________________________________________________

12. Why did you choose this institution to attend? ______________________________

13. Are you currently a full or part time student? ______________________________

14. Were you a full or part time student in the past? __________________________

   Demographic Information

15. What is your year of birth? _____________________________________________

16. Are you employed? Yes _____  No _____  If so, what is the average amount of
    hours that you work per week? ____________________________________________

17. What is your race? (a) Black _____  (b) Caucasian _____  (c) Asian _____
    (d) Hispanic _____
Appendix A (continued)

18. Do you have dependents living in your home with you? (a) Yes  (b) No 

19. If you have any dependents living with you what are their ages? 

20. What is your marital status? Single  Cohabitating  Married 

  Divorced  Widowed
APPENDIX B

Participant Agreement Form

To Whom It May Concern:

The information gathered in this study will be confidential. All participants will be notified of the confidentiality when they receive the hard copy. The identities will remain concealed because the interview will not ask for their names or any other information that will directly link them to the study. Students will be notified before administering the survey to explain why it is being administered and to discuss confidentiality and anonymity to ensure that the target sample is completely aware of the conditions of participation.

Signature (Interviewee) ___________________________________ Date ____________

Signature (Interviewer) ___________________________________ Date ____________

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APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

(For researcher use only)

Date of Interview: ____________________________________________________________

Name of Interviewee: __________________________________________________________

Name of Interviewer: __________________________________________________________

Questions and Answer period time: ______________________________________________

Participant Code: _____________________________________________________________

Questions

Personal

1. Tell me about your social life in an average week?

2. Are the people that are close to you supportive of your pursuit of a college degree?

3. What type of influence do you feel that the people that are important to you have on your education?

4. What motivates you?

5. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?

6. Who are your biggest supporters?

7. Who are your biggest detractors?

8. How would you rank the completion of school in your list of priorities?

9. What are your goals?
Appendix C (continued)

Professional

1. What type of career success have you had thus far?
2. Are you the only person working in your household? If so how does that affect you?
3. How do you feel about your current job?
4. Would you describe your current position as a job or a career?
5. How do you feel about the amount of time that you spend working?
6. What are your ultimate goals?

Academic Preparation

1. Did you find your high-school classes challenging?
2. How did you feel about your academic capabilities in high-school?
3. What type of student were you in high-school?
4. Were you on a college preparatory track in high-school?
5. Who influenced you most academically?
6. Have you had to take any remedial courses in college? If so which one and how many times have you taken the course?
7. What has been your most difficult subject been in college?
8. How has your most difficult subject affected your academic standing?
9. Have you previously been enrolled in a technical, two year, or four year institution? If so why did you come to this institution?
Appendix C (continued)

Institutional Support

1. What type of support do you think that people over age 25 need most from an institution when trying to attain a college degree?

2. What types of activities have you participated in since you have been a student at this institution?

3. How do you feel the institution feels about non-traditional students?

4. How did you feel about the overall institution when you first arrived on campus?

Peer Relationships

1. Are you involved with your peers outside of the classroom environment? If so in what capacity?

2. How well do you feel that the younger students relate to non-traditional students like yourself?

3. How are your classroom interactions with your peers?

4. How do you feel that your participation in classes is perceived by your peers?

5. What place do you feel non-traditional students have at this institution socially?

Professor Relationships

1. How would you describe your classroom experiences since you’ve been at the college?

2. What has been your favorite course? Why?

3. Have you felt comfortable expressing yourself in classes?

4. How do you feel you have been perceived by your professors?
5. Do you believe that your professors are interested in the overall success of non-traditional students like yourself?

6. Do you feel that your environment is conducive to learning?

7. Can you tell me about a challenging time that you have experienced in the classroom?

8. If you could have an academic utopia for non-traditional students, what would it look like?

Financial Resources

1. How do you feel about your financial resources?

2. If you could create a perfect financial situation for yourself right now what would it look like?

3. What is your greatest financial resource?

4. What is your greatest financial challenge?

5. Do you have other means of financial support?

6. How many hours per week do you work?
APPENDIX D

Focus Group Questions

1. What are the major influences in your life?
2. Do you feel that outside support is important for you as a college student? Why?
3. Who motivated you to seek an associate’s degree?
4. How would you describe your social life right now?
5. What have you felt most disheartening about being a non-traditional student?
6. How has your financial resources impacted your education?
7. What were your thoughts about college prior to attending this institution? How would you have ranked the attainment of a college degree prior to attending this institution? 1-10
8. How would you prioritize your social life?
9. How does your job affect your schooling if at all?
10. Have you thought about leaving again since you have re-started?
11. What made you decide to return to this college?
October 16, 2007

Dear Potential Participant:

Thank you so much for completing the questionnaire that was distributed to your class a few weeks ago. After reviewing the submitted questionnaires, I have found that several of you qualify to participate in a much needed study on the matriculation needs of non-traditional African American female students.

I realize that each of you has a very hectic schedule and your time is very precious. However, I would greatly appreciate your participation. It is my hope that the results of the study provide understanding on what is needed in order to ensure the successful matriculation of non-traditional African American female students.

Therefore, I am asking that you select a time that is most conducive to your schedule where I can interview you further. I will also inform all participants of a focus group/luncheon that will be conducted during the early weeks of November. The focus group/luncheon hopes to get all of the study participants together in an effort to discover data that could be brought forth by unrestricted participant dialogue.

The focus group/luncheon will also give each participant an opportunity to meet and greet other students that share similar experiences. Hopefully, you will leave with a feeling of community and a sense of peace, knowing that your collegiate experience is shared by other women just like you.

Again, thank you for your participation and I look forward to seeing you soon.

Nakia C. Shaw
APPENDIX F

Letter to Selected Participants

Dear __________________________:

I am currently a Doctoral student at Clark Atlanta University. I am in the process of completing the requirements for completion of my degree and the final requirement is the completion of my dissertation. My dissertation is on nontraditional African-American female students' perception of the factors that contribute to their high attrition rates in an Atlanta two year college. In an effort to complete my dissertation, I am requesting your participation.

You will be asked to complete a short interview so that I will be able to gather a better understanding of your perceptions about your college matriculation. You will also be asked to participate in a one time focus group. The focus group will be organized in an effort to try and gain a collective understanding of the issues that face non-traditional students.

All of your personal information will be kept strictly confidential, and you will be referred to using coding. It is my hope that future non-traditional students will be impacted positively by my findings and that your voices are given a forum to express themselves.

Thank you for your support.

Nakia C. Shaw

____ I agree to participate

____ I do not agree to participate

_________________________  _______________________
Student's Signature Date
APPENDIX G

University System of Georgia - Retention Rate Report by Race/Ethnicity

Fall 2000 to Fall 2004

Non-Traditional Freshmen
Institution-Specific Associate's Degree Two-Year Rates
First-Time Part-Time Freshmen
Females
Atlanta Metropolitan College

[Diagrams showing retention rates for different racial/ethnic groups from Fall 2000 to Fall 2004.]

Source: University System of Georgia, Student Information Reporting System

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REFERENCES


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