

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO COLLEGE THROUGH THE
LENS OF BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL THEORY, SCHLOSSBERG'S
TRANSITION THEORY AND GENDER SCHEMA THEORY

by

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DEDICATION

To Tricia for your support, wisdom, guidance and understanding throughout this process.

To Tim for your constant encouragement and patience with this process.

To my participants for their willingness to share their stories.

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Completing this dissertation reminded me of running a marathon. Even though each step of the race has to be run by the individual, their success does not happen in isolation but depends on the race organizers, the volunteers on the sidelines providing food and beverages, and the crowds and other runners screaming their words of encouragement. Writing this dissertation felt very much the same. Although, I had to do the work, it was the encouragement and support of so many people that helped me to finish this race because just like with running a marathon, there were many points where I asked myself, “why am I doing this,” and it would have been much easier to drop out.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, an increasing number of nontraditional students have been enrolling in college, however they face a variety of challenges in completing their educational goals and have lower completion rates than traditional students. Thus, the more institutions can understand about this student population, the better they can serve their unique needs. This qualitative study sought to understand how nontraditional students experience the transition to college, how these experiences differ by gender and which institutional factors help and/or hinder with the transition. To gain a better understanding of their transition to college, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used and the findings were analyzed using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. The participants included 10 female and 12 male participants who met the following criteria: over the age of 25, first year attending Great Falls College MSU and at least a one-year break since attending school elsewhere. They were interviewed two to three times, their interviews were transcribed and analyzed, and emergent categories were developed. The data was then analyzed using *a priori* codes developed from Schlossberg's Transition Theory followed by a further level of analysis using from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Within the context of Ecological Theory, themes related to gender differences and institutional factors were identified. Key findings included that most students found the initial transition stressful, they resorted to a variety of coping skills and there were no significant gender differences in the transition experience. Overall, they demonstrated high levels of resilience and strong coping skills. They felt welcome and supported by the institution and only a few minor areas were identified for improvement. There were a few curious findings not identified in previous research including that the male participants actively sought opportunities to serve as mentors; that some students enroll seeking new careers with greater meaning and purpose rather than just economic gain; they had difficulty relating to traditional aged students and had attitudes of superiority towards them; most struggled with technology; and college did not necessarily become easier as they progressed through their education.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

During the past 40 years, the audience for higher education has been expanding and today's students include not only recent high school graduates, but adults of all ages in varying life stages, who have diverse reasons for seeking a higher education (Bok, 2013). As the enrollment of traditionally aged students began to stall, institutions started paying more attention to older students as potential constituencies and began to accommodate their needs (Thelin, 2004). From 1978 to 1989, the enrollment of students over the age of 25 increased by 44% in contrast to enrollment of traditional students which only increased by 7% and women accounted for a majority of these students (Lazerson, 2008). Although this trend has slowed, between 2000 and 2016, enrollment of traditionally aged students under the age of 25 grew by 31% and for those over the age of 25, it increased by 27% (Mobile Digest of Education Statistics, 2017). Broken down by gender during the same timeframe, enrollment for females 25 and older grew by 29 percent and for 24 percent for males in the same age group. Thus, nontraditional students continue to make up a significant portion of the student body of our colleges and universities.

In contrast to earlier decades, this historic period marked a time when earning a degree had become an economic necessity and was seen as an entrée to a well-paying job since a high school diploma no longer guaranteed employment or making a livable wage

as it had in previous generations (Lazerson, 2008). Indeed, a college degree was viewed as a means of surpassing one's parents economically and more and more employers were hiring those with at least a bachelor's degree (Lazerson, 2008). Despite negative press and disparaging comments from some politicians that higher education sometimes receives (Zimmerman, 2014), according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics the median weekly income of a person with a bachelor's degree is \$1,137 in comparison to \$678 for a high school graduate ("Employment Projections," 2015). According to Mayhew et al., (2016), "... a bachelor's degree (compared to a high school diploma) conferred about a 33-percentile point advantage in occupational status and prestige"(p. 429). An associate's degree provides between a 9 to 17-percentile point occupational status advantage and even a vocational degree or certificate offers a 5 to 9-percentile occupational status advantage in comparison to high school graduates (Mayhew et al., 2016). In addition, those with a college degree are less likely to be unemployed. In 2015, only 2.8% of those with a bachelor's degree were unemployed in contrast to 5.4% for high school graduates ("Employment Projections," 2015). This data is further supported by analysis of research findings from Mayhew et al., (2016) who found that the greater the amount of postsecondary education an individual has, the less likely they are to become unemployed. In surveys of first year students, the perception that a postsecondary degree or certificate offers such economic and professional advantages is one of the main reasons given for enrolling in college (Mayhew, et al., 2016).

According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2008), "... an educated workforce is more employable, attracts new business, supports the economic

needs of families, contributes significantly to the state and federal tax base and is more likely to contribute to civic life” (p.10). The Lumina Foundation Report (2016) found that 58% of all Americans understand the importance of earning a postsecondary degree to their economic future. This recognition of the economic benefits of higher education has contributed to individuals who did not attend college immediately after high school, or did begin but dropped out, to recognize the importance of earning a degree and thus, choosing to enroll later in life (Chao & Good 2004, Frazier, 2009; Horn, Cataldi & Sikora, 2005; Storm, 1990).

As their numbers increased, these “older” students came to be referred to as adult learners or nontraditional students and the National Center for Education Statistics considers any student who is 25 and older to be in this category (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Particularly as enrollment of traditional students has stagnated, campuses have been increasingly marketing to and filling classroom seats with their nontraditional counterparts (Bok, 2013) and some colleges have programs designed specifically to cater to this growing student group (Selingo, 2013). For example, Western Governors University caters specifically to nontraditional students and offers their coursework exclusively online (Selingo, 2013). Kasworm (2014) found that nontraditional students are more likely to enroll in for profit colleges because they offer more online, hybrid and weekend classes that fit the needs of working adults. Data from 2017 from the National Center for Education Statistics supports this and shows that nontraditional students (defined as those over age 25) make up 28% of undergraduate students at public 4-year institutions, 38.5% at private nonprofit 4-year institutions, and 74.5% at 4-year private

for-profit institutions. Similarly, at 2-year public institutions, they represent 32.5% of students, at 2-year private nonprofit schools they make up 53% of students and at private for-profit 2-year schools they make up 60% of the student body (“Characteristics of Postsecondary Students,” 2017).

However, these changing student demographics have also created a unique set of challenges for college campuses. Whereas traditionally aged college students generally enroll full-time, are more likely to live on campus (Inman & Mayes, 1999), become engaged in campus life (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011), work part-time at the most (Saunders & Bauer, 1998) and are usually single, adult learners are more likely to be married or single with children, employed – often full-time (Kasworm, 2014), live at home and commute to campus (Inman & Mayes, 1999) and are less likely to become active in campus life (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Since a minimum gap of seven years between high school and college generally characterizes nontraditional students, they are less likely to be familiar with the culture of academia (Munro, 2011). This includes such things as a lack an understanding about the amount of time school work will take (Ben Avie, et al., 2012); often being academically underprepared and more likely to need remedial coursework than traditionally aged students (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006; Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench & King, 2014). Research suggests that because they are more likely to experience conflicting demands on their time, nontraditional students are at greater risk for dropping or “stopping” out of their education (Kasworm, 2014). Between 2006 and 2012, 44.4% of older students had dropped out compared to 26.4% of traditional students (Kasworm, 2014). Because many

institutions continue to be geared primarily towards traditionally aged students, these challenges faced by nontraditionally aged students often go unrecognized (Kasworm, 2014).

The issue of stopping or dropping out is particularly relevant to two-year campuses because nontraditional students are more likely to begin their educational journey at such institutions (Inman & Mayes, 1999). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), 80% of the students who enroll in two-year schools do so with the intent of eventually transferring and earning a bachelor's degree, yet data shows that only 29.1% actually do so within six years. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) shows that of those who enroll in two-year institutions with the intent of earning a certificate or associate's degree, only 29% of students accomplish their goal within a three year timeframe. This statistic suggests that little more than one third of the students who enroll achieve their academic goals.

Certainly, other factors besides the age of students must be considered in looking at these statistics. The typical nontraditional student is more likely to be a white female, who lives off campus, is married, has children, works fulltime, is often a first generation college student and is juggling work, family and school ("Adult Students," 2013; Samuels, Beach & Palmer, 2011-2012). This often results in competing demands that make it difficult for them to adjust to college life and becomes a factor in whether or not students persist in their education (Ishitani, 2006; Kasworm, 2014). Additional factors to be considered in examining the completion statistics for two-year institutions include that they generally have open admissions policies; enroll more at risk and first generation

students; provide access to higher education for students who might not meet the qualifications to enroll in four-year institutions (Calcagno, et al., 2008); and are often expected to do more with less funding than four-year institutions (Miller, 2013). With the emphasis on retention and completion, it is critical to understand this growing student population and the factors both personal and institutional that contribute to persistence.

Statement of Problem

Today's college campus has become age diverse with a significant increase in nontraditional students, particularly on two-year campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015 40.7% of full-time students on two-year campuses, including public, private and for-profit, were over the age of 25. The number is even higher for those attending part-time with students over the age of 25 making up 56.3% of the student population ("Characteristics of Post-Secondary Students," 2017). Regardless of the type of institution, research shows that nontraditional students have lower completion rates. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2015), 60.9% of students under the age of 20 who earn an associate's degree go on to complete a bachelor's degree in contrast to 43.3 percent of those between the ages of 20-24 and 31.4% of those over 25 years of age. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016) report based on the cohort entering college in 2010 found that 25.9 percent of traditionally aged students did not earn a degree or certificate in contrast with 49.3 percent of nontraditional students. In looking at these statistics, one also has to consider the costs of these low completion rates at both an individual, institutional and

societal level. Students who do not persist to completion, still have college loans to pay, have invested their time and energy and have not achieved any of the gains associated with earning a degree such as an improved earning ability (Hess, 2018). On an institutional level, dropouts cost colleges a significant loss in funding from both the state and federal government. The American Institutes for Research analyzed data from 2003-2008, and found that 13 states lost more than \$200 million in state funding for four-year colleges due to students dropping out during their first year. For the same period, the Federal government paid \$1.5 billion in grants to students who did not continue college after their first year (Schneider, 2010). According to the American Institutes for Research, for the cohort of students who began in 2002 and did not earn a bachelor's degree within six years, the cost on a national level was: \$3.88 billion in lost income; \$566 million in lost federal income taxes and \$164 million in lost state income taxes (Schneider & Yin, 2011, p. iv.). In addition, there is the cost to taxpayers of paying for grants as well as federal student loans that may not get repaid (Hess, 2018). These numbers are staggering! They demonstrate the importance of understanding factors that help nontraditional students persist and complete their education.

Past research has found that nontraditional students are likely to face disadvantages academically, psychologically, and socially from the moment they enroll. Academically, they often enter college unprepared for the rigors of college work and expect to continue their employment and maintain their family responsibilities with only minimal disruption (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Psychologically, they may be transitioning from the workplace where they have felt competent to a campus environment where they

suddenly lack competence (Inman & Mayes, 1999) and feel out of place among the traditionally aged students (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). This in turn may lead to social adjustment issues. Adding college classes into their already busy lives, not only increases stress levels, but frequently disrupts existing social support networks (Mattanah, Lopez & Govern, 2011). Thus, it is critical for nontraditional students to make social connections on campus (Kasworm, 2014). This is particularly challenging because of their other multiple responsibilities, they are also less likely than traditional students to engage in campus activities or invest in interacting within their academic community (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Samuels, et al., 2011-2012; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Engagement on campus is known to be a key factor for persistence in research conducted on traditionally students (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Thus, the lack of engagement generally found among nontraditional students is concerning especially considering that they are less likely to complete their educational goals than traditionally aged students (“Undergraduate retention and graduation rates,” 2017).

Despite these challenges, nontraditional students also bring strengths with them that can aid in their transition. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found that the life skills learned through employment can actually help with their adjustment to academic life. In addition, nontraditional students tend to be more committed to earning a degree in the hope of creating a better life for themselves and their families as well as serving as positive role models for their children (Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Inman & Mayes, 1999). Previous research has shown that students who successfully make the transition and persist to completion are those who are able to balance the competing demands of school,

family and work (Gilardi, & Guglielmetti, 2011; Renn, & Reason, 2013); make connections with faculty and peers on campus (Ben Avie, et al., 2012; Kasworm, 2014) and link their learning to life and work experiences (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Given that only about 30% of nontraditional students actually earn their degree (Choy, 2009), it is critical for institutions to understand why some students adapt well and thrive in a college environment (Saunders & Bauer, 1998), and others end up dropping out because of their inability to successfully transition into a student role (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Much research has been conducted about factors that contribute to college students' adjustment and success in college. Regardless of the age of the student, all must successfully transition and adapt to college life if they are to persist in meeting their educational goals. Whereas the traditional student generally moves from the role of high school student to college student, nontraditional students are more likely to be transitioning from the role of service member, employee or stay-at-home parent to that of college student. For many, rather than leaving a role behind to move into a new role, they are oftentimes adding a role into their existing lives. Research shows that being able to effectively negotiate these multiple roles is critical to their success as a student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Reay, 2003; Renn & Reason, 2013; Schuldt, 2011). Recent statistics further suggest that women are earning degrees at higher rates than men with men lagging behind by 6.3% (NCES, 2015) and the rate of males enrolling in college in contrast to females has been declining since 1979 (NCES, 2015). Thus, it is critical for

institutions to understand factors that contribute to the successful transition of both males and females to higher education. By understanding gender differences in this process, they can better address student needs and provide appropriate levels of support.

How males and females adapt will be explored using the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and Gender Schema Theory. As previously stated, nontraditional students juggle multiple roles and relationships in their environment and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory provides a perspective for understanding how these multiple roles and environmental factors interact in the lives of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a context for exploring how individuals move through and adapt to transitions in their lives (Schlossberg, 1981). In this case, the transition is adding the role of student to their existing roles and adjusting to the rigors of college. Finally, because this study seeks to explore possible gender differences in college adjustment, Gender Schema Theory provides a framework for exploring how gender roles and behaviors differ in the context of social and cultural norms (Bem, 1981).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner believed that "Development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embedded in and expressed through behavior in a particular environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27). Thus, to fully understand a situation, aspects of the individual must be understood along with environmental factors that may be contributing to a particular outcome. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that

there are five systems that constantly interact with each other and must be navigated by the individual:

- *Microsystems* which refers to the activities and relationships an individual interacts with on a day to day basis such as family, school, community, peers, church, work.
- *Mesosystems* is defined as the interactions between the microsystems a person experiences on a daily basis.
- *Exosystems* are systems external to an individual that influence their microsystems and over which the individual has no control including government agencies, media, extended family and the educational system.
- *Macrosystems* consist of the greater cultural and societal structures that influence the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem. These systems interact with one another and influence each other.
- *Chronosystem* represents the socio-historical context and environmental events and transitions that occur for the individual and within which the various systems operate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In addition to the interaction of the various systems, the individual's characteristics and how these influence their environment need also be considered. Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Evans, et al., 2010) refers to these as "*developmentally instigative characteristics*" and identified four types: first, individuals will bring forth different responses from those in their environment based on their personality traits; second, individuals respond and engage with their environments in different ways, some

with curiosity and engagement – others by observing from a distance; third, whether an individual’s structuring proclivities involve a willingness to risk and engage in continually more challenging activities or whether they remain stagnant and minimize engaging in new challenges; fourth are their directive beliefs about their environments and how much of their accomplishments are within their control versus attributed to luck or situational factors. Thus, the individual influences their environment, but in turn how the environment responds shapes the individual. This interaction between the individual and their environment must be considered in context of the various environmental systems.

Since nontraditional students tend to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, this framework is a way to conceptualize how they interact with their environment, how these multiple systems interrelate and influence their transition to college and whether or not they persist to completion of their education. This study will explore the interaction of the various microsystems within the mesosystem; how the mesosystem interacts with the exosystem; and how the individual microsystems are influenced by the exosystem. In addition, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Gender Schema theory will be used to explore the “person” component of this theory in greater depth.

Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

In their seminal work, *Counseling Adults in Transition*, Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson (2006) defined a transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p.33) that is perceived as such by the individual experiencing it. In developing her Transition Theory, Schlossberg

hoped to establish a framework within which to better understand how individuals transition and adapt to such changes in their lives. She recognized that this varies according to the individual and that not all individuals cope with these changes successfully (Goodman, et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2008). Schlossberg (1981) believed that how an adult adapts is based on “the interaction of three sets of variables: the individual’s perception of the transition, characteristics of the pre-transition and post transition environments, and the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition” (p.2-3). This relates directly to Bronfenbrenner’s developmentally instigative characteristics as it explores the person-environment interaction and focuses particularly on the individual and their interaction with their various microsystems. To better understand the impact of a transition, Schlossberg suggests it is necessary to identify the type, context and impact of a particular change event (Goodman, et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008). She identifies three types of transitions: anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and nonevents defined as changes that are expected but do not end up occurring. For context, it is important to consider whether the change is happening to the individual or to someone else in their circle and in turn, how the change impacts their day-to-day life (event (Goodman, et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008). The transition process itself consists of three phases: “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out” (Goodman, et al, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008).

To explore how well an individual copes with a transition, Schlossberg’s theory looks at the situation, self, support and strategies. The situation considers what triggered

the transition, the timing, what level of control the person has over the transition, whether it changes the person's role, the duration of the change, has the person dealt with a similar situation in the past, what other stressors the person is currently encountering and the individual's assessment of who or what has caused the change (Goodman, et al, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008). Under "self," personal and demographic factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, life stage, overall health and cultural background as well as psychological resources including ego strength, optimism/pessimism, values, spirituality and resiliency are considered (Goodman, et al, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008). This aspect of her theory relates directly to Bronfenbrenner's developmentally instigative characteristics. The level of support is explored in the context of intimate relationships, family, friends, institutions and community (Goodman, et al, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008) which relates to Bronfenbrenner's microsystem. Strategies are considered in terms of how the individual copes with transition, either through changing the situation, reframing the meaning of the transition or passively allowing the transition to occur without any direct action (Goodman, et al, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008) which relates to what Bronfenbrenner refers to as "directive beliefs" which is "how individuals experience agency in relation to environments" (Evans, et al, 2010, p. 162). Schlossberg's theory provides a lens through which to explore the individual in greater depth and consider all facets of a transition and the factors that contribute to whether or not a person is able to successfully adapt. Her theory used in context with ecological

theory provides additional dimensions for exploring Bronfenbrenner's components of person, process, context and time.

Gender Schema Theory

Individuals learn what it means to be “male” or “female” in the context of their social environment through observation, imitation, rewards and punishment (Bem, 1981). A schema is “a cognitive structure, a network of associations that guides the individual's perceptions” (Bem, 1981, p.355) and a gender schema organizes the world in terms of the male and female dichotomy (Bem, 1981). Individuals are socialized to conform to the gender schemas associated with their cultural and social backgrounds (Bem, 1981). For example, a girl might conclude that it is inappropriate to contemplate a career as an engineer or a police officer because that is a “male” profession and in turn, males may not consider jobs as a nurse or administrative assistant because these are “female” jobs. Such schemas also extend to beliefs about gender appropriate emotional expression and societal expectations regarding how males and females are expected to cope with and adapt to change in their lives (Bem, 1981). It is more acceptable for females to reveal their struggles and display their emotions whereas males are socialized to hide, control and minimize their feelings and any situational struggles they may be having (Wade, Tavis & Garry, 2015). Thus, gender schemas inform how a person is to act based on their gender identity of being male or female. It should be noted that in today's world, not every individual sees themselves in terms of such binary definitions of gender, rather some consider themselves genderfluid, as not having a fixed gender. The expression of their gender identity may swing between male and female or somewhere in between on

the gender spectrum (“Redefining Gender,” 2017). Thus, it is important to consider that some participants may not fit within traditional binary gender categories and should this issue arise, it will be addressed in the analysis of the data. However, for a majority of students, the typical gender schemas of male and female will apply and are likely to play a role in how an individual moves through the transition. Because males tend to be socialized to be self-reliant and restrict their emotional expression (Weir, 2017) they may be less likely to acknowledge any stress associated with a transition like enrolling in college.

Gender schemas are aspects of the individual that must also be considered in the context of Bronfenbrenner’s “person” component and as part of the macrosystem as they directly influence the developmentally instigative characteristics of the individual (Evans et al., 2010).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to gain deeper insight into transition issues faced by nontraditional students in their adjustment to college life at a two-year commuter institution through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory and Schlossberg’s Transition theory and to explore how these differ by gender. Nontraditional students generally juggle multiple roles and being able to successfully add the role of student is an important factor in the completion of their education (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013). Bronfenbrenner’s Theory has been used in several investigations of college students (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Finder-

Amaker & Bell, 2012; Holles, 2016; Renn, 2003; Renn, 2004; Renn & Arnold; 2005; Taylor, 2008), but it has yet to be used as a framework for exploring how the multiple roles of nontraditional student influence their transition to college. Similarly, only limited research has approached how students successfully adapt through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Karmelita, 2016; Livingston, 2009; Powers, 2010; Ryan, 2005; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). Studies by Ryan (2005), Livingston (2009) and Schiavone & Gentry (2014) have used Schlossberg's theory to explore veterans' transition to higher education. According to the Department of Veteran Affairs (2016) 72.05% of veterans were enrolled in some form of higher education and of these, 40.2% were over the age of 25. Powers (2010) applied Schlossberg's theory to explore nontraditional male student dropouts and recently, Karmelita (2016) published her dissertation exploring nontraditional students' transition to college using both Schlossberg's theory and Cross's adult learners barriers. Since many nontraditional students begin their educational journey at two year institutions (Inman & Mayes, 1999) where the average student age is 29 ("Students at Community Colleges," 2016), this study proposes to add to existing literature by investigating the unique transition issues of nontraditional college students enrolled in a two year institution using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. It will further explore how these issues may differ for men and women with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the adjustment challenges faced by this student population.

Using a phenomenological design and social constructionist philosophical lens, this study seeks to understand the meaning and experiences of the transition to college

through the description of the event as told by the participants. By gaining greater insight into how students cope with transitions and incorporate the role of student into their daily lives, institutions can provide effective and adequate resources to better meet the needs of this student population and aid in their transition. Recognizing that these needs may vary by gender further helps institutions streamline these resources rather than attempting a “one size fits all” approach.

Guiding Research Questions

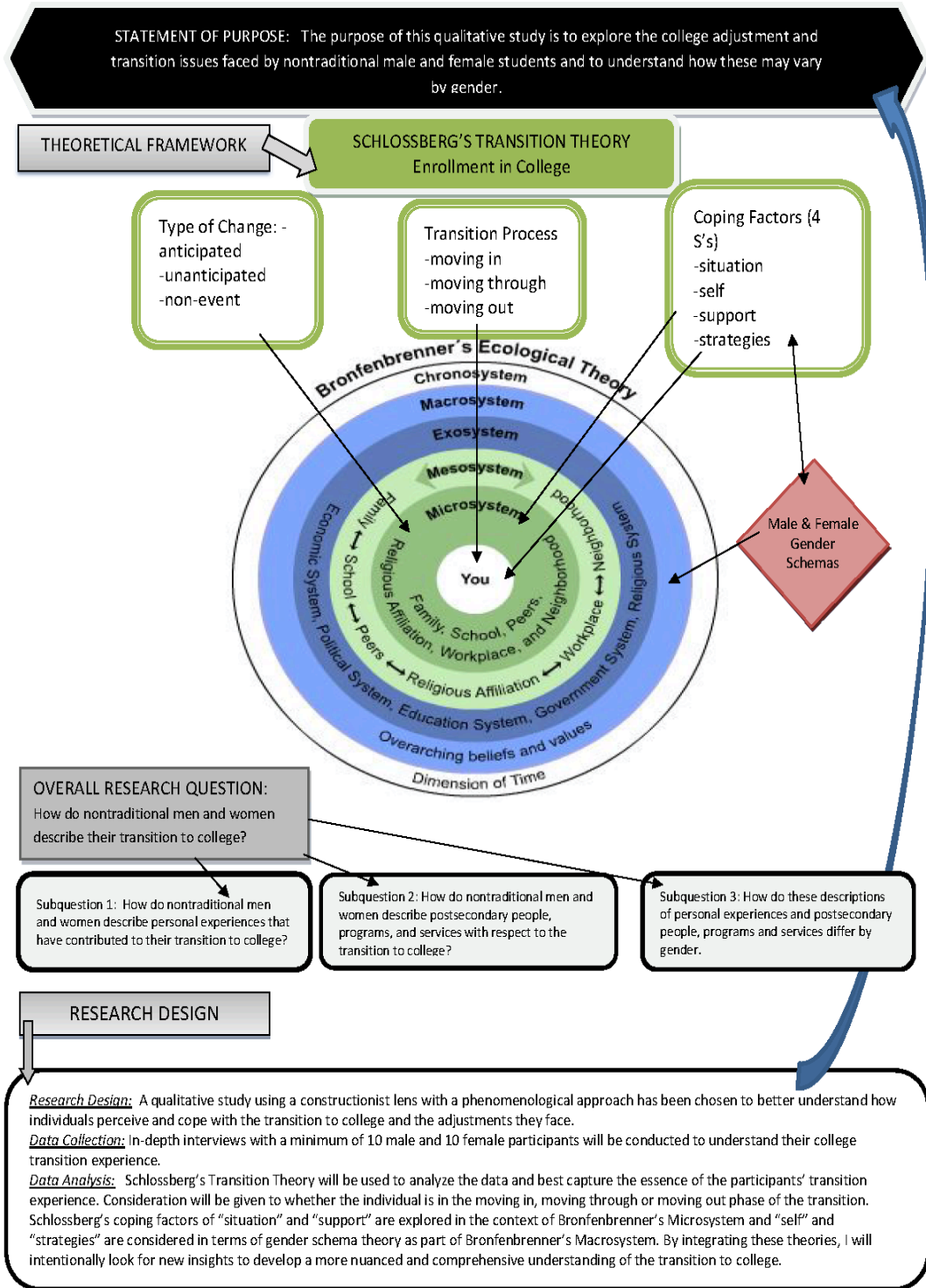
Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of this study



Research Design

To explore the research questions, this qualitative study was conducted using a social constructionist lens with a phenomenological approach. The population sample consisted of a minimum of 10 female and 10 male participants who met the criteria of “nontraditional” student or more, depending upon when saturation was reached. For the purposes of this study, a nontraditional student was defined as any student who is 25 years or older who has not been enrolled in some form of postsecondary education for a year or more prior to their current enrollment at GFCMSU. Participants were recruited through the New Student Success Coach on campus, through advertising on D2L, through flyers posted on campus as well as through snowball sampling.

Data was collected by conducting two to three in-depth individual interviews with participants about their college transition experience scheduled at different times during the academic year. Participants’ experiences were explored to gain an understanding of the essence of the college transition (Creswell, 2013) using the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, and Gender Schema Theory. These theories have been previously defined under the conceptual framework.

Limitations and Delimitations

The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand how nontraditional students successfully transition and adapt to college and how this might differ by gender. A phenomenological approach allowed for the essence of the transition experience to emerge. Because these individuals were from one two-year institution, most of whom

reside in the city of Great Falls, Montana and surrounding rural communities, these findings may not be generalizable to the overall nontraditional student population, nor might findings regarding gender differences be consistently applicable based on gender. Since only students who are currently enrolled were interviewed, this study was unable to explore individuals who are unable to make the transition to the student role and have left the institution. The objective was to gain insight into the college transition, possible gender differences and how these might inform institutional practices. Findings from this study provided new insights that may be transferable and relevant to other contexts and can lead to testable hypotheses for future research.

Assumptions

This study was based on several guiding assumptions. First, students entering college after a significant break from their schooling will go through a transition process when they enroll. Second, successful students are those who effectively move through the transition process and integrate the new role of student into their daily lives and relationships. Third, many environmental factors play a role in influencing whether or not a student is successfully able to transition and persist to completion of their educational goals. Finally, the expectations an individual has of themselves and the coping strategies they use to adapt to transitions are influenced by gender and the differences in how males and females are socialized into their roles within the dominant culture.

Significance of the Study

Much research has been conducted on nontraditional students and it has been found that they face unique adjustment issues in comparison to their traditional counterparts, yet many institutions continue to do business based on the needs of the traditional student population. This is particularly relevant since the retention and completion rates for nontraditional students is significantly lower than for traditional students. Data from 2006 and 2012 shows that 44.4% of older students had dropped out compared to 26.4% of traditional students (Kasworm, 2014) and in two-year institutions which are frequently the starting point for nontraditional students, only 36% of students overall complete two-year degrees, certificates or transfer to within six years (Calcagno, et al., 2008). In addition, data shows that the percentage of females enrolling in college and earning degrees is increasing; however, the percentage of males enrolling in college and earning degrees is stagnant. According to the NCES (2015), in 2015, only 43% of the student population was male in contrast to 1965 when 61.3 of all students were male. Most recent graduation rates from NCES, 2014-2015 indicate that 57.1% of bachelor's degrees were awarded to females in contrast with 42.9% awarded to males. The disparity is even greater for associate degrees earned in the same year, with 61% awarded to females and 39% to males (NCES, 2014-2015). This data includes both traditional and nontraditionally aged students. In addition, 57% of the students enrolled in two your colleges are female (NCES, 2015).

If institutions are to improve the completion rates for all nontraditional students, it is important to develop an in-depth understanding of the issues this student population

faces in adjusting to college and how these might differ by gender rather than assuming the challenges are the same. Based on existing research, it is known that juggling multiple roles and responsibilities creates significant stress for adult learners and given that males and females are socialized differently in our society, adjustment factors are likely to vary based on gender. Limited research has been conducted on specific ways in which the transition to college may differ for males and females. If institutions are to improve their retention and completion rates for nontraditional students, it is critical to understand how students effectively transition to the role of college student and to understand whether the type of support and interventions they need may differ based on gender. Exploring these issues using both the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory allows for a comprehensive look at how individuals effectively move into the role of college student and can provide insight into the coping strategies used by students as well as barriers they may encounter. By considering gender in this process, this study seeks to expand the existing base of knowledge regarding the role gender schemas play in the transition process. This information can be used by institutions to implement effective policies and resources as they strive to improve their retention and completion rates for nontraditional students.

Chapter Summary

Nontraditional students are the fastest growing demographic on college campuses yet have significantly lower completion rates than traditional students. This explores the process of transitioning into the student role and how this may vary by gender. With the

emphasis on increasing persistence and completion rates on college campuses today, it is critical to understand the individual factors that influence a successful transition to the role of college student as well as how institutions can better support this student group. By framing this study in the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Gender Schema theory, using a phenomenological approach, this qualitative study sought to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the essence of the college transition experience for the men and women attending a small two-year college campus.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the past several decades, the nontraditional student population has become the subject of much research because many of the challenges they face in higher education are different from those of traditionally aged students. The purpose of this study was to understand the transition issues faced by nontraditional students and how these may vary by gender. To gain new perspectives and understanding of these transition issues, this study explored them using the conceptual framework of Gender Schema Theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. In addition, the role of institutional characteristics as they relate to the transition and retention of nontraditional students was also being explored. This includes the overall campus environment, culture, student resources, faculty and administrative staff.

Thus, the purpose of this literature review was: 1) to identify what is known about the unique characteristics of nontraditional students' and the issues they face in pursuing a postsecondary education; 2) to understand the role of gender schemas and how these influence coping styles, 3) to investigate how the transition issues may differ by gender 4) to explore how existing research on college students has used Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to conceptualize issues related to college students and 5) to review what is known about effective institutional practices and policies as they relate to the success and retention of nontraditional

students. By understanding what researchers have found in these areas of investigation, this literature review helps to identify how the present study might provide additional insight into transition issues faced by nontraditional students. The literature reviewed uses either the term nontraditional student or adult learner. For the purposes of this study, the term nontraditional student will be used and is defined as any student who is 25 years in age or older and has not entered into postsecondary education in the year immediately following high school graduation. Most sources discussed in the review use this definition as well. The exceptions include research by Gilardi & Guglielmetti (1998) who defined nontraditional students as those who are employed at least part time; Powers (2010) who characterized nontraditional students as meeting one of the following criteria: delays in enrollment after finishing high school, attends college part-time, works full-time while attending; is considered financially independent, has children or other dependents, is a single parent or completed high school with a GED; Dill and Henley (1998) identified nontraditional students as those over the age of 24 rather than 25; and Vaccaro and Lowell (2010) used no specific age criteria, simply stating the average age of participants in their study as 42.

Characteristics and Challenges of Nontraditional Students

Significant research has been conducted regarding the characteristics of nontraditional students and their transition to college. On the one hand they bring a wealth of life and work experience to their learning (Compton, Cox & Lannon, 2006; Dill & Henley, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2011) and on the other hand they often find themselves

balancing multiple roles that can interfere with their studies (Inman & Mayes, 1999; O’Conor, 2009).

Although reasons for enrollment may vary, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2007) found that both males and females are generally motivated by economic necessity with the ultimate goal of being able to find suitable employment. For females, this is may be the result of a change in economic status due to a divorce where they suddenly need to develop workforce skills whereas males are more likely to return to gain job skills that allow them to be better providers (Scalley, 1993; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007). Mbilinyi (2006) found that men were more likely than women to receive encouragement to enroll in higher education and earn a degree and for females, a supportive spouse or partner was a significant factor in whether or not they pursued a degree.

Regardless of the reasons for enrollment, nontraditional students frequently enter college without any idea of how much coursework will be required of them and expect to manage school, work, a job and family responsibilities (Inman & Mayes, 1999; O’Conor, 2009). Because there has been a gap between high school and college, they often find themselves academically unprepared, lack the study skills needed to be successful and do not clearly understand the amount of time required to complete course work. (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2014; O’Conor, 2009; Powers, 2010; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Nontraditional students are more likely to have limited knowledge about how college works, be lacking in social and cultural capital, be less academically prepared, have lower self-confidence, commute and attend part time, continue working - often full-time, and juggle multiple other responsibilities (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Ross-

Gordon, 2011; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). It should be noted that included in the demographic of nontraditional students are military personnel including active duty, reserves and veterans. According to the U.S. Department of Education military students make up 4.5% of the undergraduate population (Radford, Bentz, Dekker & Paslov, 2016). Their average age is 34 and they frequently are married with dependents and thus a majority also are part of the nontraditional student population (Radford et al., 2010). Along with many of the issues identified above for nontraditional students, those who are still in the military or reserves may face disruptions to their enrollment due to deployment as well role conflict that emerges from shifting between the military responsibilities and being a student (Renn & Reason, 2013). Those who have seen combat are also at greater risk for stress related disabilities (Renn & Reason, 2013).

Powers (2010) found that 57% of nontraditional students come from lower income groups and 50% are first generation college students which can contribute to feelings of alienation on a college campus. This in turn can lead to psychological challenges, for many have transitioned from the workplace where they felt a sense of competence, to the school environment where they may feel inept (Inman & Mayes, 1999, O'Connor, 2009). Saunders and Bauer (1998) and O'Connor (2009) found that they may also feel self-conscious among their younger peers, fear being able to keep up with them and even have concerns that faculty do not enjoy having them in their classes.

Enrollment in college is likely to disrupt existing psychological support systems and thus students face social adjustments because of additional demands on their time at a point when they could most use such support (Renn & Reason, 2013). These time

constraints further make it challenging to find social support within their new campus environment because they are less likely to become engaged in campus activities (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013; Samuels et al., 2011-2012; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). As a result, it is critical for nontraditional students to make social connections in the classroom with peers and faculty which can aid in their college transition (Kasworm, 2014; Samuels et al., 2011-2012)

The key challenge identified by numerous researchers is that nontraditional students often feel pulled in multiple directions between their families, jobs and their college life (Dill & Henley, 1998; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Renn & Reason, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Samuels, Beach & Palmer, 2011-2102; Saunders & Bauer, 1998; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Dill and Henry (1998) and Powers (2010) found that female students identified time and role demands to be a major stressor, especially if they have very young children. If the woman has psychological support they were able to adjust, but they found higher levels of depression in those nontraditional students who lacked such support (Dill & Henry, 1998). Males were found to struggle more with work demands and the need to support their families (Hanniford & Sagaria, 1994).

Researchers have found that these challenges faced by nontraditional students contribute to lower rates of retention and persistence as compared to traditionally aged students. (Kasworm, 2014; NCES, 2008). In her study of persistence among nontraditional students, Wade (1996) found that those who remained enrolled tended to have fewer accumulated credits, were enrolled fulltime, had shorter end goals, i.e.

certificate or associate's degree versus a bachelor's or graduate degree, but over all had clearer end goals. They also spent more time studying and using the library, consulting with their advisors and interestingly reported more stress than students who did not persist (Wade, 1996). This relates to O'Connor's (2009) and Powers (2010) findings that students who do not assimilate into and understand the campus culture are less likely to use available services and are more likely to drop out. As in many other studies, Wade (1996) also found that numerous family obligations resulted in less campus engagement which in turn contributed to an increased risk of dropping out and similarly Taganuchi and Kaufman (2007) found that being divorced and having young children hindered graduation for both male and females.

In addition, part-time enrollment was found to be a key predictor of dropping or stopping out simply because it takes longer to complete a degree and there are more chances for outside factors to disrupt schooling (O'Connor, 2009; Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007; Wade, 1995). Part-time enrollment also results in less engagement on campus and interactions with peers and faculty resulting in less support in times of stress (O'Connor, 2009; Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). Another consideration in looking at the disadvantages of part-time enrollment is that current financial aid policies only benefit students who are enrolled fulltime. Financial aid has been shown to relieve financial distress and contribute to persistence because students are able to focus on their studies, but such aid is not available to part-time enrollees (Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). In contrast to their overall findings about disadvantages of part-time enrollment,

Taganuchi and Kaufman (2007) found that for female students with time constraints, it can actually increase degree completion.

Some additional gender differences emerged in literature exploring nontraditional students. Kasworm (1990), Scalley (1993) and Mbilinyi (2006) found male students were less satisfied with their academic performance than females and generally had lower GPAs which was a key factor for them stopping or dropping out. In contrast, many females leave because they are unsuccessful in meeting the demands of their multiple roles (Powers, 2010; Scalley 1993; Wade, 1995) and lack family support (Mbilinyi, 2006). Whereas multiple role demands have a tremendous impact on women (Scalley, 1993; Powers, 2010), family responsibilities are not a factor in most males dropping out, rather it has to do with poor academic performance and the inability to relate academic work to future employment possibilities (Scalley, 1993).

Scalley (1993) identified four predictors of dropping out: 1) poor academic performance; 2) intent to leave as influenced by psychological variables; 3) background variables including high school performance and educational goals; 4) external environmental variables, i.e. financial, family, employment and support (p. 151). Scalley found that women are less likely to drop out than men, generally have better high school GPAs and are less likely to need remedial courses. These findings regarding academic differences between males and females may be because each gender has been found to approach learning differently. Severiens and Ten Dam (1998) citing the work of Baxter Magolda suggest that women may be more open to other ideas and able to integrate new ideas with their own, whereas men are more focused on their own ideas and less open to

incorporating new knowledge. Further they found that females expected to be inspired by learning more so than men (Severiens & Ten Dam, 1998).

Taganuchi and Kaufman (2007) further concluded that persistence for adult learners is influenced by the individual's perception that the time investment and cost of earning a degree will benefit them in the long term. They found that the older a student was, the more likely they were to determine that the costs of attending college were not worth the benefits because they did not see an adequate payoff from earning a degree (Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). They found that those nontraditional students with lower cognitive skills and a history of lesser status occupations were also more likely to drop out during their first year of enrollment. For females, not only does being divorced with children serve as a predictor of dropping or stopping out but so does being married, ironically because of their greater household responsibilities (Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). However, it was found that if a spouse is supportive, then a female is more likely to complete her education (Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). Doyle (2009) found that enrolling at a two-year rather than a four-year campus resulted in decreased chance of degree completion. O'Connor (2009) found that the expectation that a degree would be earned, positively influenced persistence.

Compton, Cox and Laanon (2006) challenged many of the findings about nontraditional students suggesting that too often they are viewed through a deficit model that suggests they will face challenges in higher education. They instead propose that they are actually better equipped than traditionally aged students because they can relate prior life experiences to their learning as well as to their transition and increased role

demands. Ross-Gordon (2011) and Dill and Henley (1998) also suggest that the other life roles nontraditional students have participated in serve as assets because of the experience and social support they provide and Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found that the life-skills learned through employment can actually help with their transition. Whether looking at the unique challenges faced by nontraditional students or considering the benefits of their greater maturity and life experience, a key factor in their academic success is being able to effectively transition into the college environment.

Gender Schemas and Coping Styles

Since this study seeks to explore gender differences when it comes to the transition process, it is important to first explore the different ways in which males and females are socialized in American society and how this may result in distinct ways of coping with adjustments and transitions. Bem (1981) proposed gender schema theory as a process by which individuals develop their beliefs about gender appropriate behaviors. Bem (1981) defines a schema as "... a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perceptions" (p. 355). The male-female dichotomy is not unique to the United States, but can be found in every culture in the world, however the roles and behaviors assigned through such sex typing may vary. Gender schema theory suggests that information gets processed based on what children have learned about the types of attributes and behavior that are associated with their gender and adults further reinforce them. Bem (1981) cites as an example how quick adults are to point out how "strong," a boy is becoming or how "nurturant" a girl is but are unlikely

to comment on these characteristics in the opposite sex. She points out how male-female “differences” also insinuate themselves into our institutions, particularly in the education system, that further reinforce the schemas for developing children. Through such interactions children evaluate themselves in light of how well they measure up to these schemas and they become an integral part of their self-concept. Further, she suggests that children are taught that the difference between males and females is significant and influences all facets of a person’s life (Bem, 1981). It should be noted that a gender schema is different from gender identity but the two do interrelate.

Ross-Gordon’s (1999) work explores the ways in which individuals develop their gender identity which she defines as “...a person’s concept of him or herself as male or female” (p. 29). Gender schemas in contrast are how individuals organize their beliefs and assimilate information based on the gender they identify with and help form the person’s concept of themselves as male or female (Bem, 1981). Ross-Gordon (1999) also concluded that gender stereotypes are strongly reinforced in families, in school and in the larger cultural environment and have a profound impact on development. Ross-Gordon (1999) states:

Overall, we can conclude that gender strongly influences adult development. Clearly, there are significant differences in the developmental process experienced by women and men. However, it is impossible to essentialize the experience and argue that all women or men undergo the same process. Rather we must recognize the powerful impact of various sociocultural and historical factors on that process and honor its complexity (p. 34).

She also suggests that gender schemas influence an individual’s perception of appropriate gender related behaviors and their choice of careers (Ross-Gordon, 1999). Research

shows that more often girls are socialized to be nurturing, empathetic and connect with others. In contrast, boys are pushed to be more independent, competitive, dominant, self-reliant and hide their emotions (Aycock, 2011; Bem, 1981; Weir, 2017). Some studies have even found that communication is positively reinforced in females and negatively reinforced in males and may be the reason why females are more likely to report distress when they lack emotional social support, but males do not identify this as a factor (Aycock, 2011, p. 16). Schlossberg (1981) found a key gender difference to be that women are permitted a free expression of emotion in contrast to men who are socialized to hide their emotions. This difference as it relates to emotional expression suggests that women are better at emotional intimacy which in turn may help them adjust to transitions (Schlossberg, 1981).

With these differences in how males and females are generally socialized, it is important to consider the role of gender in how students cope with stress. The literature identifies two key coping styles: emotion focused coping and problem focused coping (Brougham et al., 2009). A third style referred to as avoidant coping is sometimes considered as part of emotion focused coping (Brougham, et al., 2009) and sometimes as a separate coping strategy (Eaton & Bradley, 2008; Endler & Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004). Emotion focused coping involves the expression of emotion, reducing negative emotions and altering expectations about the stressor and is often accomplished through seeking social support and connection (Brougham, et al, 2009; Eaton & Bradley, 2008; Endler & Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004). Problem focused coping strategies involve behavioral actions to address a particular stressor (Brougham, et al, 2009; Eaton &

Bradley, 2008; Endler & Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004). Avoidant coping utilizes denial of the stressor and blaming others (Brougham, et al., 2009; Eaton & Bradley, 2008; Endler & Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004).

Research has found mixed results regarding gender differences in coping. Some studies suggest that males are more likely to use problem focused coping strategies whereas females generally use emotion focused coping through seeking social support (Aycock, 2011; Matheny, Ashby & Cupp, 2005; Day & Livingstone, 2003; Matheny et al, 2005; Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002; Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000). Aycock (2011) and Matheny et al., (2005) propose that this may be due to males being more likely to respond to stress with fight or flight mode whereas women have higher levels of oxytocin which creates a need to protect and connect with others when life is stressful. They attribute this greater need for females to affiliate during stress to the different ways parents socialize male and female children (Aycock, 2011; Matheny et al., 2005).

Interestingly, emotion focused coping strategies that concentrate on reducing the negative emotional responses to stress have historically been seen as less effective than problem focused strategies (Cosway, Endler, Sadler, & Deary,2000). According to Cosway, et al., (2000) past research suggested that ... “task- or problem-oriented coping styles are positively related to adaptation and good health; emotion-oriented coping styles are negatively related to adaptation and good health” (p. 123). However, there is debate as to whether emotion focused strategies really are less effective (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996; Aycock, 2011). Arthur and Hiebert (1996) found that emotion focused coping

strategies were particularly useful in helping female students manage the unchangeable aspects of their situation. Arthur & Hiebert (1996), Eaton & Bradley (2008), Endler & Parker (1990), and Tamres et al. (2002) found that while males may use fewer coping strategies, they are more likely to use problem focused strategies rather than emotion focused or avoidant strategies. This may be due to their perception that they have greater control to change the situation (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). An interesting finding in Aycock's (2011) study was that just as for females, social support was more important for African American male students than Caucasian male students. She suggests that less privilege increases the likelihood of relying on social support systems to cope with stress, but this needs further exploration (Aycock, 2011). Both genders reported that their coping strategies depended on the stressors they were facing (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009).

When it comes to the transition to college, Arthur and Hiebert (1996) found minimal gender differences, but they did find that females reported needing to cope with more family and relationship demands than males. When it came to coping strategies, females reported higher levels of emotional stress and used more emotion focused coping strategies than males, but the study also supported previous findings that males and females are both likely to use problem focused coping strategies (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). Since females have access to both emotion and problem-based coping, they suggest this gives females more strategies for dealing with the transition, however they also suggest that males are more likely to perceive that they have the ability to change

their situation because of their primary use of problem based coping strategies (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996).

Another finding is that males are likely to believe that they have stronger psychological resources than females and that overall, females are more likely to perceive events as being more stressful and having a greater impact than males do (Aycock, 2011; Matheny et al., 2005). Attitudes related to perceived mastery and control and in particular males' perception that they have more control, have been found to influence coping strategies. According to Aycock (2011), mastery is defined as "...the perception that events are under one's control rather than under the control of external forces" (p. 8). Multiple studies have found that women are more likely to believe that they have less mastery/control over situations than males (Barrett & Buckley, 2009; Matud, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999; Tamres, et al., 2002; Zalta & Chambless, 2008). Gadalla (2009) found that low mastery created more distress in females than in males and also had a strong negative impact on other stressors in their lives.

The relationship between stress and illness has also been explored and it was found that female students report more illness than males; however, one possible interpretation of this is that females may use illness as a coping resource that allows them a time for self-care and break from demands of their multiple roles (Matheny, et al., 2005). Matheny et al., (2005) also propose that culturally it is more permissible for females to admit illness which males may perceive as a sign of weakness and are therefore less likely to acknowledge feeling sick. They suggest that this may also be

related to females' perception that they have less control and thus resort to passive measures – like reporting illness, to gain some measure of control (Aycock, 2011; Matheny, et al., 2005; Tamres et al, 2002).

In reviewing literature on stress and coping, it is important to consider that much research has been conducted using white male samples and it has been assumed that both genders perceive stressors in the same way (Matheny, et al, 2005; Tamres et al., 2002), where this may not be the case. In contrast to earlier research, Matheny et al., (2005) found that females had better coping strategies than males. Further, in their meta-analysis of gender differences and coping, Tamres et al, (2002) suggest that women are more open about using coping strategies than males, again due to differences in socialization and that overall “there was no coping strategy that men engaged in more than women” (p.24).

The ability to manage stress effectively is critical to nontraditional students' successful transition to college and is likely to be a factor in whether or not they succeed in achieving their educational goals. Based on the type of coping style used and individual's perception as to their level of control of the situation, different resources may be needed to help support the student through the stress of the transition. These factors are an integral part of Schlossberg's Transition Theory.

Transition to College and Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a comprehensive framework for exploring transition issues. Key elements of her theory include: 1) the type of change whether anticipated, unanticipated or a non-event; 2) the transition process of *moving in*,

moving through and *moving out* of the transition and 3) coping factors including the 4 S's - *situation, self, support* and *strategies* (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008).

Arthur and Hiebert (1996) suggest that the transition to college may be just one of many faced by the typical nontraditional student. Adding the student role to their lives results in changes and transitions in their other roles. Compton et al., (2006) support this in their findings that nontraditional students are more likely to enroll in college at a time of a life transition event such as job loss or divorce. Arthur & Hiebert (1996) also posit that adjusting to the student role is an ongoing process that requires constant adapting. According Schlossberg (as cited in Arthur & Hiebert, 1996), "Transitions that prompt a return to school join transitions inherent in the educational process itself" (p.94). They consistently found that the academic demands of college were a primary concern to all students, but their reasons varied (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). For some students it was the amount of course work or the difficulty of a particular subject matter, for others it was related to performance expectations they had of themselves. In many cases they were concerned with how the academic demands were impacting their relationships (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). To cope with the transition, they concluded that students resorted to familiar coping strategies, but these were sometimes ineffective. Their most effective strategy was found to be a positive reframing of the stress they encountered and an effort to make the best of the situation (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). Powers (2010) found that female nontraditional students often reframe their stress as going to school for the benefit

of their children, which helps alleviate some of the guilt of having less time to spend with them due to academic demands

In addition to informing Arthur and Hiebert's (1996) research, several other recent studies have used Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a framework for exploring nontraditional students. Karmelita (2016) used it to explore the effectiveness of a transition program for adult learners and found that the program was a positive experience that aided their transition to the student role. Livingston (2009) used Schlossberg's theory to gain a better understanding of transition from veteran to student. Livingston (2009) found that for veterans, the *situation* of the transition to college was anticipated and thus they could be self-directed and felt in control of the process. Once they were enrolled, they encountered unexpected transitions and nonevents, but the fact that entering college was anticipated helped them cope with any challenges. Livingston's (2009) participants reported needing to adjust to role changes both during and after enrolling or re-enrolling in college. In analyzing the *self* component of the theory, he found that many of the coping strategies they had learned in the military served them well in college, such as self-discipline, self-reliance and a focus on their goals (Livingston, 2009). They reported increased academic engagement and performance with academic goal achievements becoming their new "mission." They felt more mature and better equipped to face the challenges associated with the transition to college. They also encountered challenges in that they had difficulty relating to nonveteran peers and their major source of social *support* was other student veterans. The predominant challenge was securing their veteran benefits because of the significant bureaucracy involved.

Finally, despite their greater maturity and focus on achieving their academic goals, a consistent theme that emerged was a reluctance to seek academic help, which he attributed to their military pride, emphasis on self-sufficiency and “do-it-yourself” attitude (Livingston, 2009).

Powers (2010) used the lens Schlossberg’s Theory to explore male dropouts from a four- year public institution. Framing her findings in the context of “moving out” of the educational institution, participants cited time, employment and health reasons as primary factors in their dropping out. Their decision to drop out was made quickly and overall, they reported that college had been a positive experience and they would like to return at some point to earn their degree. For *situation*, she found that most felt it had been a good time to enroll in college. All reported having the *support* of their families, both for enrolling and dropping out. They found their institution supportive but tended not to rely on the services provided. With regard to coping *strategies*, she found that they could not relate the transition to college with anything they had previously encountered, thus they often used less proactive strategies such as enduring a situation or leaving if things were not working out. Regarding *self*, she found that participants viewed themselves as resilient and resourceful and in control of the situation, but all felt that they had encountered challenges during their enrollment. Key themes that emerged included not understanding college expectations, needing to be better prepared academically and for those who had been enrolled online, taking classes on campus instead (Powers, 2010). Powers’ (2010) findings are paradoxical in that the participants saw themselves as

capable of successfully navigating the transition, yet ironically, they ended up dropping out.

These studies utilizing the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory allow new insight into issues associated with the transition to college as does Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. The key elements of transition theory fit seamlessly within ecological theory and serve to enhance the understanding of the interaction of the various systems.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Nontraditional Students

Bronfenbrenner's Theory explores the interaction of the individual with various environmental systems that contribute to a particular outcome (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner refers to these systems as the *microsystem* (family, school, peers, workplace, church, community); the *mesosystem* which characterizes the interaction of all parts of the microsystem, the *exosystem* made up of government, educational, political and economic systems, the *macrosystem* made up of cultural beliefs and ideologies and the *chronosystem* which includes changes across time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Because the research has found that nontraditional students find themselves pulled in multiple directions, their circumstances lend themselves to analysis through this theory which will highlight these multiple directions in the context of their microsystem as well as how the other "systems" influence their microsystem. Interestingly, research on college students using Bronfenbrenner's model is limited.

In their article, "*College Student Peer Culture*," Renn & Arnold (2005) provide a solid argument as to why Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory should be used as a

framework for exploring peer culture among college students, suggesting it provides a multifaceted way of looking at the interaction of the microsystems as they influence college students as well as the impact of factors from the exosystem and macrosystem that are frequently overlooked in the research. They further suggest that the use of Bronfenbrenner's *developmentally instigative characteristics* offers the opportunity to explore not only the *how*, but also the *what* of their development (Renn & Arnold, 2005).

Renn (2003) applied ecological theory to understanding identity issues for mixed-race students on college campuses. Renn (2003) concluded that it provides a useful framework for understanding the interactions and connections between the various environmental systems that in turn can be used by student development personnel to stimulate students' exploration about aspects of self, identity and peer culture. In Renn's (2004) book *Mixed Race students in college: The ecology of race, identity, and community on campus* she uses ecological theory "...to capture the richness and complexity of the college student's developmental experience" (p. 27). In order to fully understand mixed race students, Renn (2004) proposes that ecological theory allows for an in-depth understanding of how the interactions between the student's various environmental systems influence issues of identity. She suggests that ecological theory allows for a dynamic framework to explore how individuals go about creating and recreating different identities within these interacting systems based on the feedback they receive from within each setting, thereby provided a much more nuanced understanding of racial identity issues (Renn, 2004). Torres, Jones and Renn (2009) further endorsed using ecological theory as a way to conceptualize student identity development precisely

because it takes into consideration the influence of both the micro and macro components of a student's environment. Taylor (2008) advocated using ecological theory as way to explore the process by which young adult students progress from a dependence on an external socially defined identity to an internal definition of self. Taylor (2008) recommended that educators use the knowledge of the interaction of these various systems to encourage student reflection on the multiple factors contributing to their development of internal definition of self.

Holles (2016) used Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for a case study exploring students' perceptions of their college readiness, stating that it allows for a consideration of all the areas of influence. In her interpretation, Holles (2016) effectively links her findings to various components of Bronfenbrenner's theory. She illustrates how the individual's instigating response from their environment influences their perceptions and how their experience of the college environment as part of their microsystem also has a profound impact, either positive or negative. Holles (2016) demonstrates how the *mesosystem* made up of *microsystem* interactions including social and cultural capital, family support and campus involvement were significant to students' perceptions of preparedness. Within the *exosystem*, students identified how all aspects of the K-12 system influenced preparedness. Finally, she conceptualizes how the meritocracy of the educational system can be detrimental to students and how socio-historical factors as part of the *chronosystem* further influence their sense of preparedness (Holles, 2016).

Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco (2005) used ecological theory as a model for investigating the college experiences of minority students. They focused on the

microsystem and found that while students strongly endorsed family expectations as motivating factors, they had little influence on college outcomes, rather personal and career motivations played a stronger role. They also examined environmental social supports, peers and/or family and found that “the lack of needed support would be more predictive of college outcomes than the presence of support” (Dennis, et al., 2005, p. 233). They concluded that peer support was a better predictor of grades and college adjustment than family support (Dennis, et al., 2005).

Pinder-Amaker and Bell (2012) found that using ecological theory in analyzing mental health issues and suicide among college students helped identify critical gaps for providing effective treatment. Using the theory, they analyzed mental health issues as follows: the student is at the center surrounded by their microsystem made up of family, peers, and the college campus environment all of whom directly influence the person’s well-being; the exosystem consists of the healthcare system, higher education and mass media, all of whom influence attitudes towards mental health both for the individual and those making up their microsystem; within the macrosystem, societal attitudes about mental health and treatment influence help seeking behavior of the individuals as well as political and economic factors play a role in the accessibility of treatment. They suggest that it is important to understand the interaction of these systems in order to help ensure optimal treatment protocols (Pinder-Amaker & Bell, 2012).

To date, Bronfenbrenner’s model has yet to be used as a lens through which to explore the multiple roles of the nontraditional student and how these might influence their transition to college. Those researchers who have used this theory consistently posit

that it provides an effective way to explore both environmental and contextual factors to gain a more in-depth understanding of issues related to college students. In addition, both gender schema theory and Schlossberg's Transition theory fit seamlessly into Bronfenbrenner's systems. Gender schemas are key developmentally instigative characteristics that influence the roles a person is expected to play and how they interact within all these systems. The macrosystem in turn has a profound influence in development of gender schemas within a culture. Schlossberg's Transition Theory intersects with the individual and their microsystem in exploring the self, situation, support and strategies of the transition process. Another key element to be considered within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's systems is the role of the institution as part of the student's microsystem and the roll the overall system of higher education as part of their exosystem plays in helping nontraditional students adjust and be successful in college.

Institutional Factors and Nontraditional Students

The literature shows that certain institutional factors impact transition issues and persistence for nontraditional students. In their book, *Environments for Adults,*" Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) suggest that higher education is out of sync with the needs of nontraditional students who are a diverse group of individuals and cannot easily be lumped into one category. They propose that too often institutions of higher education are rigid bureaucracies who are unable to effectively meet the needs of this unique student population. Adult learners returning to school are in a transition and thus to address needs of adult learners, they explore these in the context of the *moving in,*

moving through and *moving out* stages of Schlossberg's transition theory. For each stage they emphasize the importance of providing educational services for adult learners. In the *moving in* stage this means educating adult learners about the process of higher education through orientations, workshops and materials written in understandable language.

During the *moving through* stage, they posit that adult learners continue to need institutional and personal support as they deal with juggling multiple demands on their time. Schlossberg et al, (1989) made four recommendations to institutions to address the need of adult learners:

- Vigilance around gender and age issues both in the institution and at home
- Identifying and creating options that will enable learners to remain in the learning situation.
- Encouraging personal, professional, and academic competencies.
- Developing a sense of community for all learners, whether part time or full time (p. 110).

Further, by not only providing but making certain students are aware of relevant support services, institutions send the message that they care which is critical to retaining this student population. Finally, in the *moving out* stage where the transition issues are likely to be unique for each student, Schlossberg, et al. (1989) emphasize the importance of helping normalize conflicting feelings and providing support through transition workshops, career planning resources and mentoring. Although the book was written over 20 years ago, other literature continues to support their conclusions.

Chickering and Gamson (1991) identified seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. These practices include: 1) regular contact between students and faculty; 2) reciprocity and cooperation between students; 3) use of active learning in the classroom; 4) prompt feedback from instructors; 5) emphasis on time on task; 6) high expectations set for students; 7) understanding and encouraging diverse abilities and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). Research specifically on nontraditional students has found that best practices for them also include many of the same practices identified by Chickering and Gamson. In their study of adult learners, Hanniford and Sagaria (1994) found that institutional characteristics such as flexibility and attentiveness to nontraditional students' needs played a role in whether or not students completed their education. Southerland (2010) found that the same practices advocated by Chickering and Gamson (1991) helped encourage retention among nontraditional students and his study confirmed the findings of numerous others, that adult students are less likely to feel supported by their campus environment, especially if they are also employed off campus (Southerland, 2010).

Kerka (1989) found that it is important not to lump all nontraditional students into one group, but rather consider their diverse needs in retention efforts. She suggests effective strategies include helping nontraditional students specify both their degree and career goals when enrolling. In some cases, students may have goals that do not entail earning a degree and thus, the parameters for measuring retention need to be adjusted to consider other types of educational goals that may have been met (Kerka, 1989). More recently, Kasworm (2014) reached similar conclusions finding that nontraditional

students were more likely to enroll to accomplish specific short-term goals that did not necessarily include earning a degree. This may be particularly problematic in the era of performance-based funding which rewards institutions for retention or the number of degrees or certificates earned.

Kerka (1989) cited the work of Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) to provide institutions with effective strategies to integrate adult learners to the campus and also applied the concepts of “*moving in*,” “*moving through*” and “*moving out*” of the transition. During the “*moving in*” ensuring that there is a centralized office to provide services and programs to facilitate the enrollment process. For the “*moving through*” stage making sure there is an “Adult Learner Support Center” (Kerka, 1989, p. 4). To accomplish this level of support, Kerka (1989) recommends flexibility on the part of the campus and advocates these practices to increase retention: effective instructional systems that help students meet their learning objectives; faculty and staff development focusing on the unique needs of nontraditional students; inclusion of adult students in curriculum decisions; integration of course evaluation feedback into practices; course offerings and student services available evenings, weekends and during lunch hours; off campus locations to take classes such as shopping malls, businesses, military bases, etc.; provide credit for previous learning; ensure continuity in the classes taken that makes for easy transitions to future courses and programs; adequate financial assistance programs and flexible ways of completing coursework when faced with a student wanting to dropout. Finally, in the “*moving on*” stage conducting an exit interview that includes an

evaluation of the college experience, a review of career goals and support for any transition issues (Kerka, 1989).

O'Connor (2009) and Bamber and Tett (2000) made similar recommendations to institutions to retain adult learners including: extended hours for services and campus facilities; involving them in curriculum and program decisions; credit for previous learning; well-trained instructors; learning that is relevant and meaningful; sensitivity and responsiveness to existing and emergent student needs; and support of the campus leadership to provide all of the above.

Because adult students are likely to have multiple role demands, Kerka (1989) and O'Connor (2009), recommend that institutions provide services such as transportation and child care that allow students to focus on their academic roles. O'Connor (2009) advises institutions to adequately inform students of expectations, resources and services upon enrollment which is especially important in commuter schools. O'Connor (2009) also found that learning communities and block scheduling in which several classes are shared with the same group of students encourages engagement and connection to the campus. The use of active learning strategies that require student interaction further help students form campus relationships and increase campus integration, both of which are positively linked to persistence (O'Connor, 2009). Ross-Gordon (2011) advocates that institutions focus on andragogy in the classroom to effectively engage adult learners. She recommends that active learning strategies be used, and learning be relevant and practical (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Powers (2010) found that nontraditional students reported ineffective advising as an obstacle to completing their education.

In terms of helping students cope with their transition to college, Arthur & Hiebert (1996) make several recommendations to institutions. First, train academic counselors to recognize that students are individuals and that the factors causing stress in the transition process will vary for each person and these should be considered in the advising process. Second, make certain that campus resources are visible and that students are made aware of them as these are valuable in times of stress. Third, recognize and build on students' strengths and existing coping strategies. In summary, Arthur and Hiebert (1996) state, "Effective intervention requires assessment of the nature of the demands and the students' existing coping repertoire, as well as assistance to learn new ways to enhance the students' efforts to manage transitions" (p. 101).

Much of the literature found that nontraditional students who are enrolled part-time to be the highest risk group for not completing their education. Full-time enrollment was found to be positively correlated with engagement in effective educational behaviors and practices more so than those enrolled part-time and Southerland's (2010) findings suggest exploring whether institutions generally marginalize students who are enrolled part-time and are employed off campus. Much like Southerland (2010), Kasworm (2014) also found that a contributing factor may be a tendency for institutions to focus considerably less on the needs of part-time students. This tendency is unfortunate in light of Tagnuchi and Kaufman's (2007) findings that for female students with time constraints, attending college part-time results in a greater likelihood that they will complete their degree. As a result, Tagnuchi and Kaufman (2007) recommend that institutions concentrate on this demographic and target ways in which to decrease their

isolation and disengagement from campus life. They suggest interventions such as making instructors aware of who their part-time students are for the purpose of tracking their progress and intervening with support when issues are noted. Taganuchi and Kaufman (2007) specifically advise institutions with open admissions policies to provide strong academic support programs to help those students with less academic preparation who are enrolled part-time. By investing in these part-time nontraditional students, both the students and institutions would benefit. Nontraditional students benefit from their increased earning potential and decreased risk of unemployment associated with having a college degree (Mayhew, et al., 2016). Because institutions lose significant state and federal funding every time a student drops out (Schneider, 2010), investing in the success of part-time students seems critical to increasing completion rates.

Clearly multiple factors influence how nontraditional students transition to college and whether or not they persist to completion. Factors in the students' environment, effective coping strategies, and institutions' recognizing and accommodating their unique needs all play a role in whether or not nontraditional students achieve their academic goals.

Chapter Summary

This literature review explores characteristics of nontraditional students and the unique stressors they face in higher education, comparisons of gender schemas for males and females and how these influence coping strategies, the use of Schlossberg's transition theory as a framework for understanding the transition to college for various student

groups, and the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory as it relates to issues faced by college students. Research into factors affecting the retention of nontraditional students and institutional characteristics and adult student success is also included. The findings suggest that nontraditional students face unique issues in their transition to college, that how they adjust, and the obstacles faced in the transition process may vary by gender. Findings further indicate that institutions need to be sensitive to their unique needs and specific evidence-based strategies are recommended.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The number of nontraditional students enrolling in college has been on the rise and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015 40.7% of full-time students on two-year campuses were over the age of 25. When part-time students are factored in, the percentage goes up to 56.3% of the student population (“Characteristics of Post-Secondary Students,” 2017). Considering that the enrollment of traditionally aged students has been stagnant (Bok, 2013), many campuses have been quick to embrace this growing student population, however this new demographic has created a unique set of challenges and opportunities for institutions. Despite the fact that nontraditional students enroll with the best of intentions of earning a degree and may contribute to an important part of the intellectual diversity in the classroom, they face distinctive obstacles in the pursuit of this goal. They are more likely to be married, have children, work part or full-time and have other family and community obligations (Meuleman, et al., 2014; Samuels, Beach & Palmer, 2011-2012). They often face competing demands that make it difficult to make their college studies a priority and thus age tends to become a factor in students “stopping” or “dropping” out (Ishitani, 2006; Kasworm, 2014).

These characteristics of nontraditional students play a role in their ability to successfully transition to college. It is also important to recognize that the experience varies based on the unique circumstances of each student and is further impacted by

gender because of the ways in which males and females are socialized differently in our society. A study by Mbilinyi (2006) found that there are gender differences when it came to the transition to college. Males reported that family support and encouragement was important to their transition process, whereas females reported that their spouse/partner or children were an important catalyst for pursuing a degree (Mbilinyi, 2006). Interestingly, the number of males enrolling in college has declined and according to data from NCES (2015), they make up only 43% of both the traditional and nontraditional student population. Graduation rates reflect this as well. NCES reports that in 2014-2015, 40% of associates degrees were awarded to males. Thus, understanding how transition and adjustment issues might vary according to gender can provide valuable insight into factors that make for successful and persistent students.

The challenge for me as a researcher was how best to accomplish the purpose of this study which was to explore and enhance the understanding of the transition to college experience for nontraditional students and whether this may differ for men and women. In designing a research study, a key question I asked myself is whether to use a quantitative or qualitative approach. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, in choosing a method, it was important for me to consider the goals of the study and the research questions to be answered as well as my axiological and ontological assumptions. According to Maxwell (2013), a qualitative approach allows the researcher to "... see the world in terms of people, situations, events and the processes that connect these; explanation is based on an analysis of how some situation and events influence others" (p. 29). A qualitative approach allowed me to answer the basic

ontological question of “What is the nature of reality” (Creswell, 2013) in terms of the transition to college for nontraditional students. It also allowed for an exploration of the values that shaped my interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Because I hoped to gain an in depth understanding of the factors influencing the transition experience and how these may vary by gender in this study, a qualitative research design was chosen.

Research Design

For the purposes of this qualitative study, I used a transcendental phenomenological approach. According to Savin-Baden and Major, (2012), phenomenology is “A research approach that allows for investigating human experience at a fundamental level, seeking the essence of lived experiences as it is for several individuals” (p. 213). There are different types of phenomenological approaches and for this study I used a transcendental approach which allowed me to describe what the participants had in common as they experienced the shared phenomenon of the transition to college and it allowed me to focus on the conscious experience of the participants (Creswell, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). A transcendental approach required that I as the researcher “bracket” myself outside the study in order to understand the authentic experience of the participants without the influence of any preconceived perceptions of the transition process that I might have (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). I discuss how I “bracketed” myself apart from the analysis in the section on “Positionality and Reflexivity” later in this chapter.

My guiding theoretical orientation to explore the phenomenon of the transition to college was a social constructionist lens. According to Michael Crotty (as cited in Patton, 2002), “social constructionism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world” (p.97). This lens was especially fitting since an assumption of the study was that men and women are socialized differently in our culture and this influences how they see themselves and respond to their circumstances. My aim in this study was to understand such differences as participants transitioned to the role of college student.

I analyzed the participants’ transition process using the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. Schlossberg’s Transition Theory provided me with an in-depth method of exploring the transition process by considering whether the person was *moving in*, *moving through* or *moving out* of a transition, the type of transition, the context of the transition, characteristics of the “self,” the level of support and the strategies that were employed to cope the transition (Goodman, et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2008). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory allowed for my understanding of how the various systems in a student’s environment might influence their ability to achieve their educational goals. I began by exploring the participants’ interaction within their microsystem, which included family, workplace, neighborhood, peer groups, and influential communities including religious, civic and professional organizations as well as interaction of these microsystems in the mesosystem. In the next stage, I focused on

the exosystem including relevant GFCMSU institutional policies, procedures and personnel and how these influence the transition to college for nontraditional students along with state and federal policies impacting higher education. The final stage of analysis was conducted within the framework of the Macrosystem which consists of the cultural values and expectations that individuals are expected to conform and includes gender roles and behaviors. Thus, within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Macrosystem, I explored key themes in the context of Gender Schema Theory to better understand how perceptions of the transition as well as coping strategies used differed by gender (Bem, 1981). Gender Schema Theory suggests that each gender has a cognitive structure that guides the individual's perceptions of what it means to be male or female as well as gender appropriate behaviors (Bem, 1981).

Use of these three theories to guide my research may seem contradictory to the emergent nature of the phenomenological approach. To reconcile this, I first analyzed the data without the use of *a priori* constructs developed from these theories, constructing themes naturally from the data and thereby ensuring the data analysis was consistent with a phenomenological approach. After this initial analysis, I conducted a secondary analysis in which the original categories that I identified were compared to *a priori* categories developed from Schlossberg, Bronfenbrenner and Gender Schema Theory to determine where they align and where they diverge.

This study seeks to explore the following research questions:

Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college.

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

Context of the Study

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory provided me with a lens for exploring the distal and proximal contextual factors of this study which explored the transition to college for nontraditional students at GFCMSU. Distal factors influencing this study were found in Bronfenbrenner's exosystem and included the system of higher education in Montana, the government of the state of Montana, the federal government as well as private organizations. The state of Montana has implemented performance-based funding for higher education with a focus on retention, persistence to completion and success in remedial courses for two-year institutions ("MUS Performance Funding," 2016). This has resulted in an increased emphasis in these areas for faculty and staff which in turn can have both a direct and indirect impact on the transition process. The state government can further influence funding and policies for higher education and the federal government plays a significant role with their financial aid rules. These in turn can affect the financial viability of attending college and the amount of stress students have regarding economic concerns which can impact the transition process and will be considered in the context of

this study. On the private front, organizations like the Lumina Foundation are promoting the importance of two-year colleges and making the education relevant to student needs (Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Such advocacy helps improve perceptions of two-year campuses and further serves as a distal factor influencing the context of this study.

Proximal factors as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's microsystem include the school, family, workplace, peers, community organizations and religious affiliations with school being the central focus. These factors will vary by student and are discussed in greater detail in this paragraph. Great Falls College MSU (GFCMSU) is a small, two-year college located in the city of Great Falls, MT. The city has a population of just under 60,000 ("Demographics," n.d.). Between 2006-2010, the median household income was \$40,935 and approximately 15% of the city's population lives below the poverty line (Quick Facts, 2012). The college offers associate of arts, associate of science, associate of applied science and associate of nursing degrees as well as a certificate of technical studies and certificate of applied science (GFCMSU Catalogue, 2016-2017). In addition, students can complete their core coursework in preparation for transfer to a four-year college or university. The most recent college enrollment data from the Spring 2016, shows a total enrollment of 1,767 students with 1,042 enrolled full-time (Factbook, 2016). Of these students, 45.3% are 25 or older, with an average student age of 26.7 (Factbook, 2016). The student body is predominantly female with 28% of students identifying as male (Factbook, 2017). The average class size is 17 students with an 18:1 student to faculty ratio (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-2015). Seventy one percent of students rely on financial aid and 70% of students work at least part time (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-

2015). Thirty six percent of students are raising children (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-2015) thus as a proximal factor, children/family related issues and in particular childcare, are significant for this student body. In response to this, the GFCMSU student government helped fund the building of the Bright Beginnings Learning Center located a short walking distance from the campus. The childcare center gives priority placement to children of students enrolled at the college and provides scholarship opportunities to those parents who cannot afford the fees (“Bright Beginnings Learning Center,” n.d.). In addition, 37% are first generation college students (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-2015). As a proximal factor, it is important for me as a researcher to consider that first generation students in my sample may need more support from the campus to help them understand how college works (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005, Inman & Mayes, 1999; Saenz, et al., 2007). They frequently need developmental coursework to help prepare them academically and build self-confidence in their abilities as well as enhance their social and cultural capital (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005, Inman & Mayes, 1999; Saenz, et al., 2007). Because their families are less likely to understand academia, first generation students often have to persevere without their support and generally juggle multiple other responsibilities all of which impact their college experience (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Inman & Mayes 1999; Saenz, et al., 2007; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Although families, jobs and community are not a focus of my study, the above statistics indicate that they play a role in the transition to college and are therefore considered in the context of this study.

Positionality and Reflexivity

In a qualitative study, I as the researcher must be aware of how I influence the context and the role I play in all aspects of the project. My influence begins with the choice of the philosophical approach which serves to inform my research protocol. My preferred lens for conducting research is a social constructionist stance. This lens allowed me as the researcher to begin the process without any preconceived ideas or theories and instead look for patterns of meaning in the phenomena being studied which was accomplished by bracketing myself outside the study. I gathered these patterns from stories reflecting the subjective experiences of the participants. My ontological assumption was that there are multiple views of reality and nature of reality is subjective and constructed through life experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). I suspect I was drawn this lens, because of my training as a marriage and family therapist. This approach to treatment seeks to understand behavior in the context of the individual's relationships and looks to make meaning of patterns that occur. Thus, as with a social constructionist lens, the nature of reality is subjective and constructed through life experiences and interactions with others.

Since in this study, I sought to explore nontraditional students' transition to college, a social constructionist lens allowed participants to share their transition experience with me as the researcher through the background of their interactions as a student as well as in their roles outside of campus. The epistemological assumption was that this lens would allow me to gather subjective information through collaboration with the participants (Creswell, 2013). I believed how well a student "transitions" plays

a role in their adjustment to college. Because I had anecdotally observed gender differences in the transition process, I wanted to determine if research supports these observations. In addition, the more we as educators understand about factors contributing or impeding a positive college transition, the more the institutions can be sensitive to make policies that address student needs.

As a researcher, I have not only written about the experiences of my participants but have interpreted them to find the common themes in the phenomenon of transitioning to college. To do this effectively, I bracketed myself outside of the study (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to co-construct their reality and give meaning to their transition process without the intrusion of my own experiences influencing my perceptions. To successfully bracket myself outside the study, it was essential to keep issues of reflexivity in the forefront of my consciousness.

Savin-Baden and Major (2012) define reflexivity as “the process you use to ensure that stance/positionality is not detrimental to the research...” (p.81). To accomplish this, it was important that I as the researcher reflect on how aspects of myself that I bring to the research process influenced not only my interactions with participants, but also my interpretation of the data. To accomplish this, I had to keep in mind my own history as a nontraditional student enrolling in a masters’ degree program almost 20 years after earning a bachelor’s degree as well as my current enrollment in a doctoral program. I remembered as a new nontraditional student feeling “old” and out of place on a college campus and I have heard similar comments from some of my adult learners. In my personal experience, I have been much more motivated in both my graduate programs

than as a traditional undergraduate student and found that the time management and writing skills I had developed in the workplace helped me be a better student. In the context of this study, I had to be cautious about assuming that the participants bring these same skills and feelings to their transition experience and be open to hearing their unique perceptions.

To bracket these aspects of myself outside the study, I followed the recommendations made by Savin-Baden and Major (2012) and kept a field diary to reflect on my interactions and research process. I made notes on ways in which my gender, story and experiences might have influenced my interactions and what I heard and focused on in the interviews as well as in the transcription, coding, categorizing and interpretation process. Regular journaling helped me uncover potential biases, value judgments and subjective interpretations. Although I could not control how aspects of myself including my gender, age and faculty position were likely to be perceived by the participants and influence their stories, I made a conscious effort through journaling to maintain self-awareness of how these factors might influence the study. As a researcher, it was critical that I set my realities and perceptions aside so that I could clearly hear the experiences of my participants as lived and seen through their lens and so that together we could co-construct their transition experience. Through these steps I hope that I have ensured that these aspects of myself as the researcher have not colored my findings and I have effectively bracketed myself outside the study.

Another significant aspect of myself that I considered was my role as an instructor on campus. I had to remain aware of how my classroom contact with nontraditional

students may have fostered certain perceptions and beliefs about this student group. In my interactions with participants, I had to be aware that my role as an instructor placed me in a position of power. Even though the participants were not current students, they may still have perceived me as someone with power. As such, every effort was made to position myself as a fellow student completing a project in order to place us on an equal footing. Meeting with them in neutral settings and dressing in casual clothing are ways in which I attempted to equalize our status. I made an effort to empower the participants through the open-ended nature of the questions that allowed them to take charge of telling their stories. Based on my role on campus and as someone who has met educational goals, one possible concern was that students would give responses based on what they think I want to hear and may not feel comfortable expressing some of the challenges they have experienced in the transition process. As a white, middle class, older female, I had to be aware of potential socio-economic and cultural differences and not assume that participants have had access to the same resources I have had as a student or have attitudes towards education and success that have been part of my life experience. Despite these efforts at equalizing the relationship, I worked to maintain an awareness of the power differential that could not be completely eliminated and continually considered how my role on campus may have influenced the relationship with participants and their responses.

Since I was exploring issues of gender, I had to consider how my gender might potentially influence interactions with participants and remain aware of biases that I as a female might have towards either females or males. When it comes to gender differences,

I am fascinated by how men and women seem to approach life differently. While it may have been useful to explore these types of gender dynamics within the context of this study, I had to be cautious not to allow any stereotypes to color my interpretations of the students' experience. Among the axiological assumptions were that I may have certain beliefs, biases and value judgments about gender that potentially influenced my interactions with participants and my interpretation of the findings. For example, one bias I became aware through journaling is a belief that male students would be less likely to ask for help or admit they are struggling in contrast to female students which became evident as I journaled following my interviews.

Population and Sample

I selected the sample for this study from the nontraditional student population at GFCMSU. Most recent enrollment data from the Spring 2016, shows a total enrollment of 1,767 students, both full and part-time (Factbook, 2016). According to the GFCMSU Factbook (2016), 45.3% of students attending the college are age 25 or older. Females make up 72% of the overall student population. In terms of race, 81.1% of the student body is White, 5.8% American Indian, 1.5% African American, 2.8% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian/Pacific Islander and the remaining 7.1 % are unknown or identify as other. Thirty six percent of students are raising children and 70% of students work at least part time (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-2015).

I felt that with the high percentage of nontraditional students along with the campus emphasis on addressing the needs of students of all ages made GFCMSU an ideal

site to conduct this study. The mission statement of GFCMSU reads as follows: “Our mission is to foster the success of our students and their communities through innovative, flexible learning opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and aspirations, resulting in self-fulfillment and competitiveness in an increasingly global society” (“Report to the Community,” 2014-2015). This mission to provide education for individuals of all ages serves as a foundation for a campus environment that is welcoming to nontraditional students. The college has made every effort to consider the varied needs of their student population and offers strong support services that if utilized, aid in the transition to college. Since in one of the research questions, I wanted to explore how aspects of the institution influenced the transition process, this setting provided me with an opportunity to determine whether services and supports geared towards nontraditional students were effective in aiding the transition and whether there were gaps in the types of services needed. Through this study, I also hoped to provide insight into whether participants actually utilized such services and supports and whether this had an impact on their transition to college. This campus setting provided access to nontraditional students in the type of environment needed to address the research questions under investigation.

Access to Participants and Confidentiality

With the permission of the college administration, I recruited participants for this study by creating a flyer (see Appendix A) which was posted in key areas around campus and a copy of the flyer was included as a news item on the D2L Online Learning System home page. The notice on D2L helped make other faculty and administration aware of

the study and resulted in a several participants being referred to me in that manner. In addition, the New Student Success Coach on campus gave the flyer to students meeting the criteria during his coaching sessions with them. Recruiting participants using these methods was considered non-probability, convenience sampling. Due to FERPA and to minimize the power differential between myself and participants, they needed to self-refer rather than me reaching out and contacting them. Although this is not the most strategic way to recruit participants, it was still an appropriate sampling method for a qualitative study because it allowed me to select individuals meeting the criteria I was investigating in this study from those students who initiated contact with me (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). I also utilized snowball sampling as several participants referred individuals they knew who met the study criteria. Snowball sampling was appropriate since nontraditional students were able to identify others who had recently transitioned to college (Fink, 2002).

Because I am faculty member of the institution where the study was conducted, the power differential between participants and the researcher had to be taken into consideration when recruiting participants. I was aware that if students were invited to participate directly by me, they could feel undo pressure to say yes knowing that at some point they may find themselves in one of my classes and have concerns that saying no could negatively impact their grade. To avoid any possibility of students feeling pressured, I recruited participants passively with the posting of flyers and information on D2L, so that there were no direct requests by me as the researcher, rather potential participants made the initial contact with me either by email, phone call, text or in a few

instances by personally stopping by my campus office and inquiring about the study. When I used snowball sampling, the participants served as intermediaries in recruiting any individuals they identified as being appropriate for this study and provided my contact information to additional prospective participants. Using intermediaries in this manner helped mitigate the power differential between the participants and myself as the researcher. As part of the recruiting efforts, I offered an incentive of a \$25 gift card which was given to the participants at the time of their follow-up interview. I included information about this incentive in the consent form (see Appendix B) that participants signed as well as by verbally informing them that they were eligible to receive a \$25 gift card even if they chose not to continue with the study at any point.

In addition to discussing this incentive with participants after they reviewed and signed the consent form, we also discussed how their confidentiality would be maintained. I informed them that I was using recording apps on my iPhone and iPad to record the interviews and that both devices were password protected so that only I could access them. They were told that the recordings would be transcribed and saved as Word documents to Dropbox. These documents would be accessible from my two personal laptop computers and my work computer on which Dropbox has been installed. All three computers require passwords to access the desktop which protects access to any of my files. If Dropbox has not been downloaded on a computer, the files can only be accessed with my login and password credentials. I also informed participants that any printed materials pertaining to their interviews would be stored in a file cabinet in my office on campus which is kept locked. In writing the actual dissertation, I informed them that only

their initials would be used as identifiers and in discussing the findings, thereby protecting their identity.

Sample

My initial goal for a sample was a minimum of ten male and ten female nontraditional students, however the final sample consisted of 12 males and 10 females. By the time the last three to four participants were interviewed, I felt that many of the themes were repeating themselves and that saturation had been reached. According to Fusch and Ness (2015) saturation has been attained when "...there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain new information has been attained and when further coding is no longer feasible" (p. 1408). The participants I selected met the following criteria:

- 25 years of age or older
- A gap of at least one year between their completion of high school or previous enrollment in college and their current enrollment at GFCMSU.
- First year attending GFCMSU.

Other than these basic criteria, the sample was heterogeneous as to enrollment status (full or part-time), marital status, children and employment status. Since one aspect of Schlossberg's theory explores the "situation," this allowed me to investigate how such factors contributed to the transition process.

Table 1: Participant Information

ID	Age	Sex	Gap in Enrollment	Previous College	Enrolled in GFCMSU	Job	Marital Status	Children	Enrollment Status
AD	32	M	13 years	1 semester-dropped out 2 nd semester	Fall 2017	FT Town Pump	Partner	none	PT- 6 credits
BB	30	M	6 years	2 semesters poor grades	Spring 2017	FT-CNA	Single	none	FT-12 credits
EE	30	F	1 year	1 semester MSU Billings – 10 year break Helena College for DH prereq's-	Spring 2017	PT-Server	Married	Two: ages 4,5	FT-16 credits
IB	27	M	9 years	none	Spring 2018	PT - Bartender	Married	Three: ages 7 months, 8, 9	FT-14 credits
JHM	35	M	10 years	Twice- enrolled in Dickenson State, but did not complete	Spring 2018	None Has taken over household duties	Married	Three: ages 4, 4, and 4 months	FT-12 credits
JA	26	M	6 years	1 semester – dropped out	Fall 2017	none	Single	none	F -17 credits
JV	44	M	27 years	none	Fall 2017	PT- Walmart- Auto-motive Repair	Divorced	Three: teen-agers	FT-15 credits
JHF	40	F	1 year	Bachelors -2000 MSUBozeman	Fall 2017	none	Single	none	FT-16 credits

Table 1 Continued

KW	27	F	1 year	Pre-req's at various schools, 8 years after HS	Fall 2017	PT. Walmart	Married	Two: ages 2 & 4	FT-16 credits
LC	36	F	13 years	Bachelors-MSU Bozeman 2004 - Marketing	Summer 2017	FT- Insurance Co	Married	One :age 2	PT-6 credits
MJ	66	M	47+years	Bachelors degree - Math 1970	Fall 2017	PT – ASC GFCMSU	Married	Seven: adults	PT-3 credits
NT	26	M	6 years	Some Bible college	Spring 2017	PT - Ponderay Medical Center	Married	Two: ages 3 & 1	PT-7 credits
PW	41	F	5 years	Right after HS, dropped out. Took courses off and on over the years.	Fall 2017	None	Lives with boyfriend	none	PT-7 credits
PVL	30	F	1 year	Some courses in Florida	Fall 2017	FT	Married	none	PT-3 credits
PK	53	F	1 year	Off and on over the years	Fall 2017	Seeking employment	Single	none	PT-9 credits
RE	61	M	33 years	MSU Bozeman, Salish Kootenai, No degree	Fall 2017	None	Married	Four: adults	FT-14 credits
SA	40	M	12+years	none	Spring 2018	PT	Married	One: age 3	FT-15 credits
SH	53	F	30 years	ND State U. Bachelors, Veterinary Science 30 years ago	Fall 2017	FT- Centene	Married	Five: adults	PT-9 credits

Table 1 Continued

SW	28	F	6 years	Attended 3 years after HS, did not do well.	Spring 2017	2 PT jobs	Married	One: age 4	PT-9 credits
TK	53	F	35 years	none	Fall 2017	None	Divorced	Five: adults	FT-12 credits
TT	29	M	6 years	Bachelors-2011	Fall 2017	PT- Target. Guard	Married	none	FT-13 credits
WH	31	M	13 years	none	Spring 2018	none	Single On again/off again girlfriend	One: age 6 lives with mother	PT-11 credits

Instruments

I collected data for this study through open-ended participant interviews. In using a transcendental phenomenological approach, it was recommended that the interview be unstructured, yet include guiding questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Each participant was scheduled for two to three interviews spread throughout the 2017-2018 academic year. They were told the interviews would last about one hour. I determined if a third interview was needed through my personal judgment as to whether new information could be gained by setting up additional meetings with the participants. The focus of the first interview was to address the questions that I had developed to help guide my study (See: Appendix C). The interview questions ask participants to provide background information including previous experience with college, work experience and current living situation, describe their transition to college, identify factors that influenced the transition and discuss the role that the policies, programs and people GFCMSU played in their transition. The purpose of the subsequent interviews was to follow-up on questions that went unanswered in the first interview, to elicit further insights that may have been stimulated by previous interviews and to gather data from different stages of the transition process. For any campus programs identified as playing a role in participants' transition, support documentation from the college website and campus catalogue were analyzed also.

Procedure

With the participants' permission, I recorded the interview sessions on my iPhone and iPad and later transcribed them. The interviews were held in a neutral setting to help minimize the possible power differential between myself as the research and the participants. I invited the participants to choose a meeting location either off campus or in a neutral location on campus. Four female participants elected to meet in local coffee shops, and the remaining participants all indicated that meeting on campus would be most convenient for their schedules. Those interviews took place in a conference room on campus to help preserve confidentiality.

I conducted the interviews over the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semester. Originally, my goal was to have initial interviews take place early in the fall or spring semester when students were in the "moving in" phase of the transition along with one to two follow up interviews later in the year when they were in the "moving through" phase. Instead, I interviewed some participants as they were nearing the end of their first semester or beginning their second semester. This was due to scheduling issues for myself and the participants as well as recruitment challenges. When the initial notice was posted, there was an immediate response from 6-8 potential participants which was not adequate for the study, thus I made several renewed efforts to recruit participants towards the end of the fall 2017 and beginning of the spring 2018 semester through additional news announcements on D2L.

A critical part of the conducting the interviews was to establish rapport with the participants. To do so, I used many of the same skills I use as a therapist in establishing a

connection with clients, particularly active listening, letting them pace the interview process and validating their experience.

Data Analysis

There are different methods that can be used in the process of analyzing data. Since this study uses a phenomenological approach with a social constructionist lens, it was important for me to use methodology that allowed for the “phenomenon” of the transition to college to be constructed. One fitting approach suggested by Savin-Baden & Major (2012) is Hermeneutical Analysis. This approach involves, “... the analysis and interpretation of social events and their meaning to participants” (p. 443). The goal of analysis includes “seeking the meaning of text for people in the situation” and “telling the participants’ story” (Savin-Badin & Major, 2012, p.443), both of which allow for context and behavior to be examined.

To effectively analyze data using this approach, I had to take several practical steps. After each interview, the recordings had to be transcribed in order to begin the process of data analysis. A key task I faced in this process was determining how the data should be organized (Creswell, 2013) and I made the decision to use *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis program. I saved the transcription files as Word documents and imported them into *NVivo* to be analyzed. To ensure data security and participant privacy, I installed *NVivo* on one of my personal laptops which is password protected. As mentioned previously, I stored the interviews as Word documents in Dropbox which

requires a password to access and is installed only on my work and two personal laptops which are also password protected

The next step was for me to get a sense of all the materials that had been collected. Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers immerse themselves in the data in an attempt to see the big picture before organizing it into categories. As each recording was transcribed, I made notes to highlight key concepts and themes from which I could establish larger categories (Creswell, 2013). In addition to the notes, I kept memos to help me develop ideas and descriptions for these categories (Maxwell, 2012). These categories are described in detail in Chapter 4, giving me the opportunity to explain what had been experienced during the course of the interview. From these initial categories, I developed emergent codes allowing for key themes to be identified from the data which in turn allowed the phenomenon of the transition process to be captured.

In the second phase of the analysis, I compared these emergent codes to the *a priori* codes that had been developed from the key constructs of the theoretical framework being used for this study as way to determine where they may overlap and where they diverge. Maxwell (2013) and Creswell (2013) suggest that using emergent and *a priori* codes provides a means of capturing data both from the participants' perspective and allows for the consideration of how relevant theory informs the findings.

A priori codes developed from Schlossberg's Transition Theory helped capture the essence of the student's transition experiences. I used the following *a priori* codes:

- Transition from the student's perspective (anticipated or unanticipated).
- Description of moving in, through and out of the transition.

- Role of self, situation, support and strategies in the transition.

The next step was for me to explore the findings through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Theory as a basis for understanding the instigative characteristics of self and how these interact with external systems in the environment that play a role in the transition process. I used open coding to capture how the external systems impact the college transition experience from the participants' perspectives with these categorized into the systems identified in Ecological Theory. Within the microsystem, family/relationships, work, school and community were explored. These related back to Schlossberg's exploration of situation and support and allowed for the exploration of these factors within the context of the interaction of the systems that comprise microsystem and mesosystem of Ecological Theory

Under the exosystem, themes related to federal and state organizations and policies were identified and an in-depth analysis of themes related to the institution's policies, programs and personnel has been conducted. I used open coding to allow for the participants' perceptions to emerge regarding how the institution influenced their transition. From the key themes, I created emic categories to capture the experience of the participants

Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, which looks at the role of cultural values and expectations, I made comparisons between the male and female participants to determine whether data varied by gender in terms of the transition process and in the context of their microsystems as well as the macrosystem as it relates to the cultural and social expectations associated with gender. I used open coding to discover

the participants' methods of moving in, through or out of the transition and then arranged these into emic categories. Codes that I developed were "initial transition," and coping styles including "changing the situation," redefining the problem," and "managing stress." These were compared by gender. According to Maxwell (2013), this allows for an understanding of the participants' experience to form which is consistent with a phenomenological approach rather than using etic categories which would be aligned with the *a priori* codes and which would have been more likely put the focus on what I as the researcher saw as going on.

Using emic rather than etic categories to initially code the data throughout analysis was a way to ensure that I bracketed myself outside of the research, which is consistent with a transcendental phenomenological approach (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). I also utilized the previously discussed recommendations of Savin-Baden and Major (2012) to help me bracket myself outside of the study, including keeping a field diary, regular journaling and ongoing reflection of how aspects of myself could potentially influence my analysis of the data. This process helped contribute to ensuring the trustworthiness and validity of the findings.

Methods for Ensuring Credibility and Validation

To ensure the credibility in this qualitative research project, it is important that the interview questions were relevant and valid. To accomplish this, I had my dissertation committee members who would be considered subject experts review the questions that I planned to use with my participants (see Appendix C). These experts all have doctoral

degrees in the field of higher education and have conducted extensive research on college students. They agreed that the interview questions were credible and would help elicit the kind of information needed to answer the research questions posed in this study.

Validation in qualitative research is established through determining the authenticity, dependability, trustworthiness and transferability of the research findings (Creswell, 2013).

Authenticity was achieved through my conducting interviews with diverse participants and by meeting with them multiple times at various stages of their transition process until saturation was reached. Creswell (2013) suggests that such repeated interactions with participants help build trust and allows the researcher to clarify information and check for any misinterpretations of the data thereby ensuring authenticity. According to Maxwell (2013), the use of triangulation, collecting data from participants multiple times decreases the chance of research bias and creates a way of verifying findings

Multiple interviews with each of the participants also resulted in the collection of “rich data” helping establish dependability of my findings. Maxwell (2013), describes “rich data” as information that is collected over the long term through intensive involvement in order to provide “...data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (p. 126). Maxwell (2013) recommends searching for negative cases and discrepant evidence to ensure dependability. This process involves a meticulous examination of the data looking for anything discrepant and contradictory as well as consideration of how this information

influences the conclusions that have been made. I have addressed discrepant and contradictory findings in Chapter 5.

Transferability was established through the use of rich data. By my using rich description of the research findings, it is more likely that other researchers will be able to use the information and transfer it to others settings (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). It further helped me to provide a complete picture of what was under investigation (Maxwell, 2013).

Including all of the above steps in the research process helped ensure the credibility and validity of the findings and answer the research questions in a thorough and thoughtful manner.

Chapter Summary

The number of nontraditional students enrolling in college is on the rise and they bring unique challenges to their student role. Oftentimes they are also parents, work part or full-time and have multiple other outside obligations that can conflict with their student role and their transition to college life. This study explored the unique transition issues faced by nontraditional students and how these may differ by gender through the lens of, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. A qualitative research design was used to explore the research questions. The research was approached using a social constructionist philosophical lens and transcendental phenomenological framework. This approach required that I as the researcher bracket herself outside of the study and address issues of reflexivity. To

accomplish this, I kept a field diary as a means of uncovering potential biases, value judgments and subjective interpretations.

The context of the study is a small two-year college located in a city with a population of 60,000 people. Nontraditional students make up 46% of the campus population.

Since I am an instructor on campus, ways of minimizing the power differential between myself and participants was addressed by using passive recruitment methods that allowed the participants to initiate contact with me, holding the interviews in a neutral setting and allowing participants to guide the interview process.

The sample consisted of 12 male and 10 female nontraditional students who were over the age of 25 and who had a gap of at least one year between leaving high school and enrolling in college. I recruited the participants by creating and posting a flyer on campus and on the D2L home page which also spurred referrals from other faculty. In addition, I had the New Student Success Coach personally give flyers to his students meeting the participant criteria and several were recruited through snowball sampling via other participants.

Data was collected through unstructured interviews with open-ended questions used to guide the data collection process. I analyzed the data in several stages. During the first analysis, I used open coding that allowed key themes and categories to be constructed from the experience of the participants. In second stage, I related these themes to the *a priori* codes developed from framework of Schlossberg's Transition theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. Within the

framework of Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, I explored the data to identify the role that institutional factors play in the transition process and within framework of the macrosystem I compared the findings by gender to determine where the data aligns and where it differs. I achieved credibility of the interview questions by having a panel of experts review them. Authenticity, dependability, trustworthiness and transferability of the findings was established through multiple interviews, rich data, and triangulation.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon of the transition to college of nontraditional students at a two-year commuter institution through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and to compare how these issues may differ by gender. In addition, this study explored the role college personnel, programs and services play and where changes might be made to better facilitate this transition. This chapter discusses the research findings in the light of these theories and compares how they differ by gender, thus addressing the following guiding research questions:

Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

As described in Chapter 3, the data analyzed included transcriptions of participant interviews, interviewer reflections and memos as well as a review of campus documents

and webpages describing the postsecondary programs and services relevant to this study.

In this chapter, I will first explore the data through emergent categories developed from the interviews, followed by a second and third phase of analysis using *a priori* codes developed from Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, I will further compare the findings from the previous data by gender. In the final analysis, I will explore college structural issues, including personnel, programs and services in the context of both Bronfenbrenner's microsystem and exosystem.

Initial Analysis

After I transcribed all the recordings, I imported the participant interviews into *NVivo* to begin the initial round of data analysis. While keeping the guiding research questions in mind, I analyzed the transcriptions from which categories emerged that were then created as "Nodes" in *nVivo*. These emergent categories were: Initial Transition to College, Ongoing Student Experiences, Personality Characteristics, Personal Circumstances, and College Structural Issues. During the initial analysis of each interview, specific subcategories within these categories became apparent and are depicted in Table 2:

Table 2. Categories developed from the initial analysis

Category	Subcategories
Initial Transition to College	Attitudes towards traditional students Previous college experience Technology Support systems on campus

Table 2 Continued

Ongoing Student Experiences	Campus involvement Career decisions Coursework & major decisions Successes and challenges
Personality Characteristics	Coping Strategies Motivation Time Management
Personal Circumstances	Employment Finances Health Living Situation Reason for Enrollment Relationships Unexpected Events
College Structural Issues	Admissions Advising Academic Success Center (ASC) COLS Class Class Format Faculty Library Orientation

Once I added these secondary themes, I analyzed all the interviews again and coded them based on these additional themes. A discussion of my key findings in each category and subtheme follows beginning with a look at the personal circumstances of the participants in this study.

Personal Circumstances

In exploring participants' personal circumstances, the following subcategories emerged: employment, finances, health, living situation, relationships, unexpected events, and reason for enrolling. Of the 22 participants, 13 were married, 2 lived with partners, 7

were single or divorced. Nine participants had young children and five participants had grown children living away from home.

As far as their living situations, three of the single participants lived with roommates and one currently lived with his parents, and the other three lived alone in their own apartments. Of the married students, 11 owned their own homes. One lived with his family in a rental property owned by his in-laws and the other married student had a unique situation, where her husband lived with his brother and their children in a rental property in Washington, while she rented a room from a family member in Great Falls in order to complete the dental hygiene program. One of the other married female participants, who was also enrolled in the dental hygiene program, had a similar situation in that she lived with a roommate in an apartment in Great Falls and her husband and children resided in Helena. The student whose family lived Washington State only planned to visit her family at the end of the fall and spring semesters during the break periods whereas the student whose family resided in Helena drove there every weekend to spend time with them. One participant was actually living in the Great Falls Rescue Mission at the time of the first interview but had moved into an apartment by his second interview and a divorced participant resided with his parents for financial reasons.

Of those participants living with spouses or partners, most indicated that they were supportive of their education. The four female participants with young children all reported that their spouses took over a majority of the childcare and other household duties so they would have time to do schoolwork. Two of the married male students who were attending fulltime, but were not employed, were expected to take over domestic and

childcare duties by their spouses who were the breadwinners in their families. Only one participant who lived with his boyfriend felt that his partner was not very supportive either emotionally or in terms of taking on additional household duties. Fortunately, this participant had a strong support system on campus which he reported helped compensate for the lack of support at home.

Twelve of the participants were enrolled full-time and the remaining ten were part-time taking anywhere between 3 to 11 credits. Of the 12 students enrolled full-time, one had a full-time job as a CNA and four others worked part-time. Two of the full-time students who were not employed at the time of their initial interview were employed part-time by their second interview. Of the students enrolled part-time, four had full-time jobs and three worked part-time. Eight of the participants were not employed during the period in which this study was conducted. It should be noted, that for those students who worked part-time or full-time, all consistently reported that their employers were supportive, respected their school schedules and even made accommodations to their work schedules to allow them to attend class.

The majority of participants had very specific career goals as a reason for enrolling. Most had been working or in the military and either wanted to get into careers where the earnings were decent, and they could build good lives for their families, or simply wanted careers with more meaning. One participant enrolled because he enjoys learning and two of the female participants' enrollment was triggered by having an empty nest.

Participants' financial situations played a critical role in whether or not students worked. Those who didn't work generally had other sources of income or were supported by their spouses. One participant had saved enough money and was receiving an income from renting her condo in Bozeman so that she did not have to work, but that level of financial security was the exception. Another was receiving disability benefits and also had a spouse who was the primary breadwinner. Two of the participants reported experiencing financial hardships and were actually looking for employment.

Even when participants had a level of stability in their relationships and living situations that allowed them to pursue their education, it was not uncommon to have something unexpected happen that required further adjustments. LC's situation stands out. She is married, has one three-year old daughter and works fulltime at an insurance company. She was taking six credits during the fall semester and was adjusting well when her mother who was visiting for the Thanksgiving holiday fell and broke her hand and knee, thus adding the role of caregiver to LC's already busy schedule. Not only did this give her more to juggle, but her mother was not particularly supportive of LC's decision to enroll in college, especially because she already had a bachelor's degree. When I saw LC for her second interview at the end of the fall semester, she was "hanging on by a thread," and although she had enrolled for the spring semester, she was not sure whether or not she would have to withdraw. In following up with her during a third interview, she had continued and was completing the spring semester, but was tremendously stressed. Three other students had family members get sick requiring them

to make adjustments to their schedules to accommodate the additional responsibilities but were not impacted on a day to day basis as much as LC.

One student was not available for a follow-up interview and reportedly stopped attending mid semester because of illness in his family, but I was unable to obtain specific information about the circumstances.

Another area where the unexpected can happen is with childcare. KW's husband had been caring for her children out of state and the plan had been for him to continue to do that until her education was completed. His brother was helping him with the childcare, but then received a job offer requiring him to move. Since her husband was in the military and worked full-time, without his brother's help, other childcare arrangements had to be made. At the time of the final interview, the revised plan was for the children to come live in Great Falls with their mother at the end of the summer. This required her to find an apartment and make childcare arrangements with family members who lived in Montana so she could continue attending school.

The other area that challenged several of the participants were issues with their health. One student ended up having to withdraw from her classes just a few weeks before the end of the semester because she was hospitalized. Another had to drop all but one class due to health reasons which in turn resulted in her losing financial aid and threw her into a financial crisis. What is most notable is that despite these unexpected issues, all but one continued to persevere in pursuing their education.

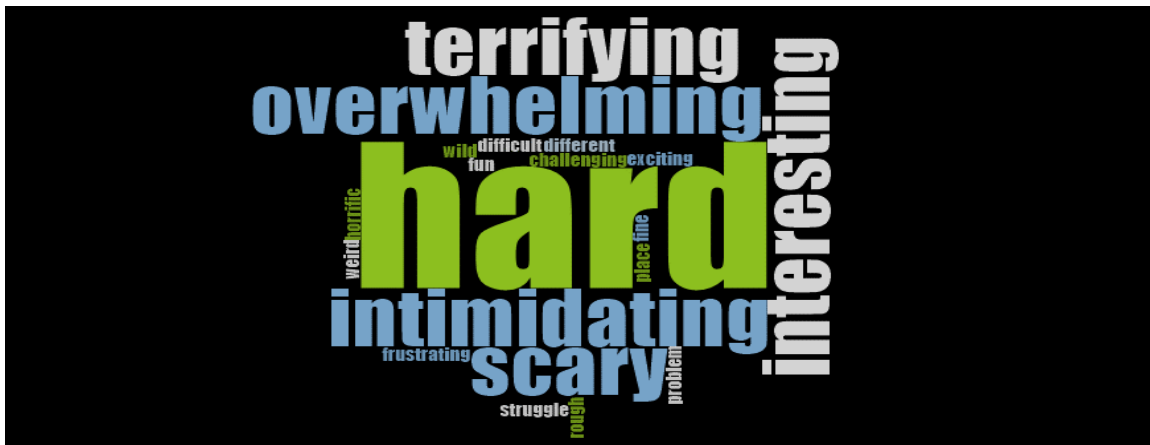
The themes that emerged regarding the initial transition to college and ongoing student experience seek to answer Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college.

Initial Transition to College

In considering the initial transition to college, it may be useful to understand the participants' previous experience with higher education. Five of the participants already had bachelor's degrees, 12 had attended college in the past but had not completed any degrees or certificates and for five of the participants, this was their first-time enrolling in college.

When asked about their initial transition to college, participants consistently used words like "terrifying," "hard," "intimidating," "nerve-wracking," "very rough," "uncomfortable," "stressful," "scary," "anxious," "overwhelming," "a struggle," "one of the most difficult things I've attempted in my life," "horrific," "wild," "challenging," and "like running into a wall" to describe their experience. One called it "fun" and another "exciting" and four described the transition as interesting, no problem and fine.

Figure 2: Word cloud describing initial transition to college



Notwithstanding how participants may have described the initial experience, all described challenges in adjusting regardless of whether or not they had previously been enrolled in college during some other stage in their lives. Challenges that were consistently mentioned included learning how to study, learning how to learn, how to read a textbook, writing papers and conducting research, completing tasks such as creating posters digitally, PowerPoints or making a graph, correctly formatting papers and even where to find information and material they needed for class and assignments. RE, PK, and TK who were over age 50, believed that their memories and processing abilities were not as good because they were older. In addition, participants spoke of needing to learn to prioritize their work, because several found themselves putting all their time into their harder courses while letting their grades slip in those classes they perceived to be “easier.” Even though most participants said they were more focused being in school at this stage of their lives, at least two students said they struggled with finding the motivation to complete their work.

Another common theme was the surprise at the amount of work and time school required. Several had listened to their advisors or had enough insight on their own to start with a fewer number of credits to give themselves time to adjust. Three of the participants ended up dropping at least one class because the workload was overwhelming when added to their other responsibilities. Most expressed surprise at the impact enrolling in college had on other areas of their lives. They noted in particular less time with family, limited time for leisure and social activities and very little time for self-care.

To get through these challenges, participants described finding support systems on campus. For some it was making a connection with individual students in their classes, discovering students on campus who they had gone to high school with, using the Veterans Success Center or seeking help in the Academic Success Center and connecting with tutors or other students there. A great example comes from LC, a 36-year-old student who already has a bachelor's degree, and enrolled in her first class, biology, during the summer of 2017. She had been toying with the idea of coming back to school and thought she would start by taking one class. During class introductions, she shared how nervous she was at being back in school and a traditional student turned to her and said, "Don't you worry, we got you." That student invited LC to join a study group with her and the participant said it was this experience that cemented her decision to continue attending school. JHF, a 40-year old student who had been accepted into the dental hygiene program and was terrified about starting, despite the fact that she already had a bachelor's degree, immediately saw qualities she admired in another student and they connected and became study partners. Regardless of whether the connection was made

through a service provided by the college or with another student, it was clear that having some sense of connection and support on campus was important to most of the participants.

Quickly developing such connections was particularly important since, a psychological adjustment identified by a majority of participants was that of feeling out of place on a college campus because of their age. Despite the fact that GFCMSU's student population consists of more than 45% being over the age of 25 (Factbook, 2016), their comments included "feeling out of place," "feeling like an old fuddy duddy," "feeling weird being around younger kids," not relating to younger students, and even feeling discriminated against for being older. BB summed it up as:

I feel like when you come back there's kind of like this feeling like you have to almost fight for validity. It's like you feel like you don't really belong because it's like you missed your window so you really have to fight hard for that. I feel like I have to kind of earn this. Like I'm outside the window, but I'm going to show you I belong here.

Interestingly, when the participants were discussing their own experiences of being an older student on campus, their observations would shift to their perceptions of traditional students. Several participants made comments like "I can remember being like that," as if laughing at the foibles of their own younger selves. There were many remarks suggesting that they perceive traditional students as "clueless and naïve," "wearing rose colored glasses," "immature," "lacking in social skills," "more dramatic" and generally less motivated about school. Some suggested it was difficult to connect and relate to the traditional students because of generational differences, and this was said with what seemed like an air of superiority. Several of the nontraditional students expressed a desire

to advise and mentor them, yet they perceived that the younger students might not be receptive. Even though nontraditional students were more likely to perceive traditional students as being less serious about their education and simply going through the motions, a few felt like college was much easier for them. This quote from IB sums it up, “Everybody else in my class, they’re like 20, 22-year old people and they all know how to do everything. Because they’re semi fresh out of high school and already know how to do everything.” In particular, there was a perception that traditional students were more comfortable around technology.

The topic of technology was another significant theme that emerged as part of the initial transition. Participants had various levels of computer skills depending both on their age and whether or not they used computers in their places of employment. For some who were more comfortable with technology, the adjustment was more about learning to navigate D2L, the online learning management system, or publisher programs such as MyMathLab. For others it was learning basic computer skills such as how to use Microsoft Office, uploading and downloading documents, saving and finding files on their computers in addition to also needing to learn to use programs like D2L and/or MyMathLab. Generally, the participants over the age of 40 expressed the most difficulty with adjusting to the technology, particularly if they had not used computers in their places of employment. Interestingly, most did not go to eLearning to seek help with technology, but instead either asked their peers or figured it out themselves. Several stated that it would have been helpful to have a more in-depth orientation in navigating D2L.

From the themes that emerged, nontraditional students find the initial transition to college quite daunting and requiring many adjustments. BB offered this analogy:

So, I think it's in Missoula or Helena, they got that carousel where you're riding on the horse and you can grab like the rings and if you get the gold ring, congratulations to you. Well it [school] feels like a real live horse and your first semester back, you don't even realize how to ride a horse and you're still expected to grab and reach for these things that are on your path and I'm like well I can't even hold on at the same time as grabbing these things. So, your first semester is like a total scramble.

This quote helps illustrate how ill equipped nontraditional students feel when they enter the halls of academia. It does not matter whether they have been previously enrolled in college or already have a degree. They consistently reported struggling with how to study, balance their multiple roles, using technology and simply feeling out of place.

Ongoing Student Experiences

As participants came in for their follow-up interviews, we explored their ongoing experiences as students. The categories that emerged were successes and challenges, course, major and career decisions, and campus involvement.

One might assume that as students' progress in their education, school gets easier, and according to the data from this study, in some ways it does, but it is not without ongoing challenges. In their interviews, students mentioned many successes. In particular, passing classes with good grades was described as helping build self-confidence about their abilities. Their comfort levels with technology and completing assignments also increased. They reported feeling better able to prioritize their work and balance it with their home lives. Most stated that they felt comfortable asking for help either from instructors, the Academic Success Center (ASC) tutors or their peers.

Some expressed challenges with the ongoing grind of school, procrastination and maintaining their motivation, particularly as the semester progressed. With the exception of one student, those who expressed this challenge appeared to have brief lapses but were able to push through and keep going. One student who really struggled with motivation was JV. He had not done particularly well during his first semester and was fighting the same battles during his second semester. He had three online classes and one face to face class and felt that a big part of the problem was the delivery format, that he needed face to face interaction to remain on top of his assignments. When I asked him what he planned to do, he stated, “So I’m anticipating a few days in the near future of some staunch make up time.” He felt that as the end of the semester neared, the looming deadlines would help him overcome his procrastination. JV also admitted “I want the end product without all the work.”

Participants reported that as they progressed in their education and moved beyond introductory classes, the coursework became more difficult and they had to revisit how they were studying and come up with new strategies. Several expressed frustrations with studying really hard and then not doing well which resulted in increased stress and performance anxiety. RE in particular struggled with this. He said:

You come and you think you’re prepared for the test and you studied many hours...and it’s just like it left, just like it leaves. Afterwards you can explain every little thing and say well this is this or this is that to a classmate. It just goes poof [during the test].

Such experiences led to them re-evaluating what worked and what didn’t work as far as their study habits.

RE said, “On my first one [lab test], I got a 91, and it’s been going down ever since. I got a 67 on my last one, that bugs me, but I’m trying to think of other ways that I can combat it. I go down and spend time in the open and lab and use that.

Another factor contributing to their stress was figuring out teacher expectations and adjusting to different teaching methods, particularly if they were not compatible with the individual’s learning style. Several students struggled with comparing themselves to other students and feeling lacking or being highly perfectionistic and feeling like failures when they did not consistently earn A’s on tests and assignments. JHF in particular struggled with this. She said:

...so just the dynamics of this person got an A on this and this person got an A on this, and I got a B. Just feeling like you’re less than they are... And I realize I can’t compare myself, because every time I do, I feel bad about myself and I don’t want to, but it’s hard not to. It’s hard when you hear people say ‘oh I got a100 on that’ and I got an 85.

Those participants planning to apply to specialty programs such as nursing and dental hygiene were particularly stressed about getting good grades and getting accepted in those programs which are highly competitive.

Although many nontraditional students enroll in college with a clear-cut idea as to their major and career goal, this is not always the case. Six students were using their enrollment as a time to explore their interests and consider their options. Two participants had enrolled with a specific program in mind and as they were taking classes and other interests were being piqued, they began to consider other options. One participant, NT, was in the midst of completing the final prerequisites to apply to the Physical Therapy Assistant program when he decided to withdraw mid semester and enroll instead in the welding program the following semester. With the exception of MJ, who was taking a

class for fun, the remaining students all had definite career goals and were either already in specialty programs or completing their prerequisites.

The final area that was explored as part of their ongoing student experiences was their involvement on campus. Two participants had gotten involved with student government and one took part in service Saturdays organized by the campus student activities coordinator and held at different nonprofit organizations around Great Falls. The remaining participants basically said the same thing – they had no interest in getting involved on campus because between their school, home and/or work responsibilities there was simply no time.

These ongoing student experiences were also significantly impacted by personal factors such as health and family issues that occurred during the semester. These unexpected events were discussed previously in the section on Personal Circumstances, however their ability to cope in the face of such events, had much to do with aspects of their personalities which I will explore in the next section.

Personality Characteristics

To better understand how nontraditional students describe their transition to college, it is important to identify how participants' personality characteristics influence their adjustment to college and ability to deal with the life circumstances that may occur and have the potential to interfere with completing their education. The subthemes that emerged included motivation, coping strategies and time management.

A majority of participants said that their determination to reach their end goal helped them deal with the stress of being a student and motivated them to overcome

obstacles. They also brought up the fact that they had to pay for their education as a strong motivator for persisting. Being accountable to others, whether people on campus or to family was a strong factor that helped several participants persist, particularly those who were parents wanted to set good examples for their children. Several students mentioned a desire for ongoing personal growth. One of the participant's said that seeing peers who had already completed their education motivated him to get one. Finally, numerous participants found that deadlines motivated them to complete their work.

To cope when things were difficult, students' identified setting aside "me time," and spending it doing things they enjoyed and valued such as exercising, taking bubble baths, reading, hobbies, playing with pets, reflecting, praying, spending time with family, etc. They consistently reported that taking breaks for these kinds of activities helped them cope with the ongoing grind of school work and that the breaks rejuvenated them and allowed them to keep going. Along, similar lines, several participants mentioned focusing on better self-care such as getting adequate sleep, eating healthy, drinking water and giving up habits they saw as detrimental such as smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol.

Consistently students identified asking for help as a key strategy, whether help managing their home responsibilities or help with school work. Several participants identified this as something they had not done in their previous attempts at college, but they now understood the importance of help seeking behaviors. JA, for example, reported that asking for help was outside his comfort zone, but he knew if he wanted to pass a difficult chemistry class, he had to ask for help.

Students used solution focused strategies such as re-evaluating their study habits and priorities if they found themselves not doing well. Most were willing to learn from failures and use them to make adjustments and change strategies. In some instances, this included withdrawing from a class or two to cut back on the number of credits being taken in order to achieve a better life balance and ensure that they did well in the courses they were taking.

Several sought professional help through counseling and/or were on medication to help with symptoms of depression, anxiety and ADHD. Others sought support by talking to their peers. Several students stated how helpful it was to have their struggles normalized by their peers or faculty members, particularly as the semester progressed and it became more challenging to persevere. And when things became overwhelming, several students reported having meltdowns during which they would cry and scream, but in every instance these meltdowns were short lived and because of their support systems, they were able to get back on track.

Also notable, is that a majority of students identified time management strategies as something that helped them cope. Their key strategies included recognizing their most productive study times and using that information to create specific times in their schedules for completing schoolwork, reviewing their syllabi at the beginning of the week and making “to do” lists that included prioritizing their workload, making adjustments when necessary to their other responsibilities, such as cutting back on their hours at work or spending less time on leisure activities, creating a work space without distractions, and in some cases scheduling specific down time. Several students

commented that they would work ahead if they found themselves caught up which helped decrease their stress should something unexpected come up.

Regardless of the coping or time management strategies used, ultimately students recognized that they just needed to keep persisting. These analogies from two of the students sums this up:

IB said, “And you gotta push through. Like when you’re running they say you hit a brick wall and the brick wall will determine the kind of person you are. Either you’re going to stop or push through... You learn you just gotta push through. No reward comes easy in life. Where there’s greatness there is sacrifice.”

BB phrased it as: “So for me, it’s almost like you just have to put down your head and push forward. It’s like walking in a snowstorm and it’s really windy where you don’t want to face it, but you have to put your head down and just keep on walking forward and rely on your ability to get it done. Because whether you want to complete it or not, it has to get done. Because if you do it now, you don’t have to worry about it later. It’s hard and it sucks and there was a lot of trial and error and you just have to get it done. You need to keep going to get to the warm cabin so you don’t get hypothermia, so you just need to keep chugging on. You have to...I can’t curl up and take an eternal sleep in the snow. I gotta keep going.”

College Structural Issues

Research subquestion 2 seeks to explore how the people, programs, and services students encounter on campus influences their transition to college. In discussing their experiences, the following subcategories emerged: admissions, advising, academic success center, College Studies (COLS)Class, class schedules and delivery format, faculty and orientation.

Enrolling in college is the first step any potential student has to take, so that experience can be significant in priming them for their college experience. Overall, participants’ experience with the admissions process was positive and a majority

commented on how helpful the staff was in guiding them through the enrollment process. Negative comments included too many hoops to jump through, frustration with the online aspects and in one case, a negative customer service experience with an employee in financial aid. Most expressed being annoyed at having to do the required trainings on substance abuse and sexual assault, although they saw the value of these for traditionally aged students.

In order to help with the transition to college, students are required to attend a New Student Orientation. Here is how it is described in the college catalogue:

New Student Orientation

All new students attending classes on campus will be required to attend a class titled Essential Start. Students will have several class days to choose from and will attend the one-day-only class prior to the start of the term. Additional information about the Essential Start class will be given to students during their scheduled appointment with their academic advisor. This is a class that each student will register for in their first semester. During this class, students will discuss what it takes to be successful at Great Falls College MSU; meet with IT Services to create a single login and password for all systems on campus; meet with eLearning to learn how to navigate the learning management system called D2L/Brightspace; and will meet with Financial Aid Services to complete Entrance Counseling and understand what it means to be a “smart borrower.” This class is free of charge and is offered on campus and online for student convenience. (GFCMSU College Catalogue, 2018-2019)

Comments regarding the orientation process were mixed. Some participants found it helpful, others felt it was a waste of time. Some wished there was a more in-depth orientation for the technology.

The advising staff also plays an important role in the initial admissions process and in providing ongoing guidance to their students. Overall, the participants reported

positive experiences with the advising center and most frequently used the word “helpful” when describing their interactions with their advisors. Several expressed surprise that their advisors reached out to them when they had missed class or done poorly on an exam. One participant felt they had been given bad advice regarding their career options in nursing and he wished he could have chosen his advisor rather than having one appointed. Two other participants said that they felt that the advisors did not understand where they were coming from or what they needed, and one participant said she wished they were able to be more helpful in mapping out career paths.

Thirteen of the 22 participants have used the Academic Success Center and of those, 9 used it regularly for tutoring and they were appreciative of the help they had received. Those participants who did not currently use it, all stated that they were aware of it as a resource and that they would use it should the need arise in future courses. One participant said she wished they were open more hours and another likes the fact that he regularly sees other nontraditional students working in there. That same participant said that when he saw the younger tutors working on their own classes, he felt that made them unapproachable, like they should not be disturbed.

New students are expected to take College Studies (COLS) 103: Becoming a Successful Student, which is a one credit class. Here is the class description from the course catalogue:

To graduate from Great Falls College MSU, every student is required to take [COLS 103](#), Becoming a Successful Student, or meet its equivalent. The course emphasizes strategies for academic and personal success, including academic and career planning, goal setting, and academic skill development in areas such as note-taking, study skills, test-taking strategies, and time management skills. Students are expected to enroll in

this class during their first semester or prior to completing 16 semester credits. (Great Falls College MSU Catalogue, 2018-2019)

Reviews of the class were mixed, some found it a waste of time, others found aspects of it useful such as keeping journals or learning how to study. Several participants said they found the class tremendously helpful. A theme that came up repeatedly was how much work the class entailed particularly since it is only a one credit class. One of the participants who felt it was a waste of time could see the value of the class for traditionally aged students but felt that it would be helpful to have a comparable class structured to address the unique issues faced by nontraditional students.

Another theme that emerged was the delivery format of the classes. A majority of participants had taken both face-to-face and online classes and in general, they preferred face to face. Often, they took classes online out of necessity, either due to their schedules or because the course was only offered online. Participants appreciated the flexibility of online classes, but consistently felt they required more self-motivation and perceived that there was less accountability because there was no face to face interaction with the instructor or their peers. Several students commented that online was not compatible with their learning style, so they tried to avoid online classes. Others missed the people interaction and the connection of being on campus. Regarding face to face classes, several commented that they liked the smaller class sizes on our campus but wished there more evening classes available. IB was participating in a cohort model that had been implemented in the Spring 2018 semester and he felt sharing several classes with the same students was beneficial.

Participants frequently brought up their instructors and the comments were consistently positive. They felt their instructors were approachable, flexible, responsive to their needs, and often going out of their way to be helpful and accommodating to them. Particularly those students who had attended school on other campuses with larger class sizes, liked the fact that faculty actually knew their names. Several commented that they were close in age to their instructors and this made it easier to interact with them. Other themes included being challenged to think and being pushed out of their comfort zone.

PK summarizes participants perspectives stating:

Every teacher I've worked with has been great, especially if you go to them personally. They might have office hours, but it seems like if you need them, they're available. I haven't had a situation yet, where I've needed to contact them and explained my situation, it seems like they were always willing to work with me and if I need to do extra credit, I try to that, but I think they're great.

In terms of negative comments, two people mentioned having difficulty with AP chemistry because they felt the instructor expected them to have a certain level of knowledge and thus it was difficult to keep up. PW was upset with a faculty member because they did not give her an incomplete after she had missed classes due to being hospitalized. This comment was quite the exception as others talked about faculty's willingness to work with them under similar circumstances. Especially because PW had been hospitalized, the unwillingness to grant an incomplete seemed mystifying to me as a faculty member, in part because it appears counter to the GFCMSU incomplete policy.

The policy states:

An Incomplete (I) grade is issued at faculty discretion when student coursework has been satisfactory, but unavoidable mitigating circumstances have prevented the student from completing the course.

After consulting with the instructor of the course, a student must make a formal request for an incomplete grade by completing the Request for an Incomplete Grade form, stating what unavoidable mitigating circumstance(s) prevented completion of the work and proposing the conditions under which the work will be completed. If a request form does not accompany the final grade, the student will be issued a Not Recorded (NR) grade until the proper paperwork is completed and submitted to the Records Office. If the instructor approves the request, the student will have until the end of the following semester to make up the Incomplete. If a student fails to make up an Incomplete within the allotted time, the incomplete grade will be converted to an F. The Division Director will approve all Requests for Incomplete Grades before they are submitted to the Registrar for posting. The Department Chair or Division Director must be given all information necessary to do final grading for the student as backup for the instructor in case he/she is not available to do the grading at the appropriate time (GFCMSU Course Catalogue, 2018-2019)

Although PW did not disclose any information related to her standing in the class prior to her illness, the policy would suggest that her coursework up until that point had not been satisfactory as this is the key reason why a request for an incomplete grade would not be granted. Interestingly, of all the participants, this person was the only one who had a strongly negative view of the college.

I will now explore these emergent themes in greater depth through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory to see if applying these theories elicits new insights into the phenomenon of the transition to college.

Data Analysis Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory

In this section, I will explore the participants' interviews through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory to help capture the essence of their transition experiences and focus on answering both the Overall Research Question: "How do

nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?” and Subquestion 1: “How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?” The analysis will include whether from the student’s perspective, the transition was anticipated or unanticipated, how students move in, through and out of the transition. In exploring the “moving in,” “moving through” and “moving out” stages, the role that self, situation, support and strategies play in their transition to college will be analyzed.

Type of Transition

In reviewing the interviews, I found that 21 of the 22 participants perceived their enrollment in college as an anticipated event. These 21 made a conscious decision to further their education, generally fueled by their dissatisfaction with their current employment, wanting more of a sense of purpose in their employment, feeling that they’d reached a dead end in their current job, retiring from one career to pursue another, filling the space left by an empty nest or for the pure joy of learning. One participant’s transition was fueled by an unanticipated event, being injured in the workplace. He had been working at a heating and plumbing company with the hope of eventually getting into firefighting, but his foot getting crushed derailed that dream. Tired of being at home on disability and feeling stagnant, he decided to enroll in the spring semester just two days before the deadline and quickly identified a new career goal, becoming an RN.

Thus, it can be seen that for a majority of participants, enrolling in college was an anticipated event, however in several cases it was triggered by other life transitions including empty nest (2 participants), leaving the military (4 participants), retirement (1

participant), getting injured (1 participant), getting laid off (1 participant), and a major medical condition (1 participant)

Moving In

In the previous section, I explored the initial transition to college. Here I review these findings in the context of Schlossberg's concept of the 'moving in' phase of a transition. Although enrolling in college is not specifically discussed in Goodman et al.'s (2006), *Counseling Adults in Transition*, issues arising during the "moving in" phase of starting a new job are discussed and in comparing these to the issues identified by participants during the initial transition to college, there is significant overlap. According to Goodman et al, (2006):

The transition to a new job requires the worker to understand the expectations of peers, subordinates, and supervisors and also to learn the company's formal and informal norms. It often requires learning new skills and almost always requires learning new ways of using old skills. It can result in clients feeling marginal, the feeling that they are at the edge, on the fringe (p.167).

Substitute the word "student" for "worker" and college for "job" in the previous quote and it is easy to recognize that participants identified many similar themes. Just like a worker having to learn new skills and figure out institutional norms, new students have to do the same thing on their campus. In fact, key themes that emerged were trial and error of figuring out what works, learning how to study, how to prioritize, adjusting to and learning about technology and where to find things. The idea that those beginning a new job feel marginal came through in the words used to describe the initial transition to college such as hard, intimidating, nerve-wracking, very rough, uncomfortable, stressful,

scary, a struggle, terrifying and horrific and certainly in BBs quote that there is a sense of needing to fight for validity on campus.

In their discussion of the transition to a new job, Goodman et al., (2006) point out that oftentimes new employees do not receive adequate orientation to prepare them for their new responsibilities. They cite this as at least one reason why 50% to 60% of new employees end up resigning within seven months of being hired. This theme of being properly oriented was also an issue identified by participants' during their interviews. Several commented that the orientation was not as thorough as it might have been, particularly in the area of technology. Students also expressed the need for better orientation in their individual classes including clearer directions as to where to find assignments and support materials and in navigating course shells. BB, who had been enrolled at GFCMSU five years previously did not need to go through orientation because he was considered a returning student. He said,

I really wish that there was someone, or that there was some kind of orientation thing because I didn't do an orientation because I had been a student before and there was no re-orientation. If there was just like an hour and someone told me, heh, we use this program called D2L and what you want to do is go in and print off all your syllabi and if there's any content, just print it out and organize it because when you go to class, and everyone shows up and they have these stacks of papers printed and you're like where did you get that? I was ten minutes early to this class and I know I didn't get handed this stack of papers. So, you just kind of start off on the wrong foot. I just wish someone would be there to say this is how we run things now.

JHM had a similar experience. When asked what it's been like coming back to school, he responded:

Ahhhh, I'd say it's a steep learning curve because it's like pretty much running into a wall, especially with human bio. Because like when I

traditionally went to school and stuff, everything was based on your book. The internet had only been around for a handful of years and it wasn't like a big resource like it's used today. Everything was based on your book, whereas now like my human bio class, there's 3 websites that has all my information scattered across these websites and I've got to know where it's at and how to obtain it and kinda put it all together to make it into something presentable for me that I take to class and then I pick what she says off of there, but my first couple weeks were a struggle because I didn't know about these extra things. You know like your homework is on this one, you turn in your assignments on this one and there's extra stuff on this one.

Both of these quotes illustrate how ill equipped students feel during the initial “moving in” phase and how important some type of orientation on both an institutional and individual course level is.

In applying the issues associated with “moving in” that were identified by Goodman et al., (2006) to students, it is easy to understand why having a positive experience during the initial transition to college is critical to student success and in helping them “move through” college.

Moving Through

Once they were in the “moving through” phase, most of the participants were bolstered by their successes. Doing well on tests and assignments helped to build their confidence. They began to feel more comfortable with technology as well as the resources available to them. Through trial and error, they were better able to prioritize their workload and achieve better balance. But despite these accomplishments, the moving through stage is not without its challenges.

Goodman et al (2006), aptly describe the key task for workers during the “moving through” phase as “hang in there, baby,” and this also applies to college life. A major

challenge identified by the participants was maintaining their motivation in the face of the ongoing grind of studying and doing homework. TT said:

I was worried I was going to fall into my old ways with procrastinating. I almost started getting that way in about the middle of the semester when things were just very repetitive, and I almost fell off the wagon a little bit before Thanksgiving... I stopped studying a whole lot. I just didn't do a whole lot.

Just as in a work environment where individuals often have to adapt to organizational changes, each new semester students face new transitions as they adapt to new courses, different instructors and teaching styles and increasingly more difficult course work. TK said:

I feel kind of disappointed because I feel like at the start of the 2nd semester, I thought you've got this now. But it was like you don't... I think the struggles were different... Well, my math class was a struggle for me and I worked really hard on it... I may not have passed well enough to pass the class and I may have to take it again and I have to deal with failure. For a majority of the participants, there was the ongoing struggle of balancing

school with other life responsibilities and this too, was part of the daily grind. SW said:

Just my stress levels are higher because of the content of school and right now we have a full house, we've got company. They're staying until Friday. They got there Saturday night, so it's been interesting. So, I've had to play homemaker and entertain on top of school and work and parenting and everything else.

Although one might expect things to get easier as college becomes familiar territory, these quotes help illustrate the challenges of the "moving through" stage whether it is staying motivated, adjusting to new course work or needing to balance multiple roles on an ongoing basis.

Moving Out

Several of the participants did move out of the student role, in some instances this was likely to be temporary. Goodman et al., (2006) suggest that the moving out phase includes endings, role exit, changes in relationships and routines. NT withdrew mid-semester, but at the time of his final interview was planning to return the following semester and enroll in the welding program rather than pursuing admission to the PTA program as he had originally planned. In the interim, he was planning on working full-time and thus he is facing new transitions with his temporary exit from the student role and will face moving in and through in his new program of study. MJ is a unique case in that he only enrolled in one class for fun. At his final interview, he said he was not taking classes in the current semester but hoped to enroll again in the fall. In his case, other than not taking a class, there was minimal role change or impact on his existing routines. IB disappeared from campus and did not respond to a request for a follow-up interview, so his future plans are unknown. Goodman et al., (2006) suggest that in his case, if he does not re-enroll, he may need to mourn the dream he had of pursuing a career in criminal justice as part of the moving out process.

To better understand how participants effectively navigate the “moving in,” “moving through” and the “moving out” phase, Schlossberg identified “The 4 “S” System: situation, self, support and strategies.” The key findings for each of the 4 “S”s will be examined to better understand their role in the transition process.

Situation

In exploring how a person's situation affects their transition, Goodman et al., (2006), recommend considering these eight variables: what was the *trigger*; *timing* in terms of the individual's social clock, how much *control* do they have in the transition; does it involve a *role change*; is it a permanent or temporary transition (*duration*); do they have *previous experience* with similar transitions; what other *stressors* are they facing; and how does the individual *assess* the situation - as positive, negative, neutral? I will now examine the data within the framework of these factors.

Trigger. For 10 of the participants, the decision to enroll in college was definitely triggered by other life transitions as stated previously. These events included empty nest (2 participants), leaving the military (4 participants), retirement (1 participant), getting injured (1 participant), getting laid off (1 participant), getting out of prison (1) and a major medical condition (1 participant). Six of the students had stopped out of college and had now re-enrolled to pursue their educational goals. Reasons for stopping out varied, but often had to do with timing. In several cases students had moved to new locations or they had completed pre-requisites at other campuses and were waiting to get into specialty programs. For some participants the decision to enroll came about gradually, often triggered by some dissatisfaction with their current career and in one instance, the participant enrolled because he thought it would be fun to take a college class again.

Timing. One reason that the transition to college presents more challenges for nontraditional students than for traditional students is the timing in terms of their social clock. Crandell, et al (2012) define a social clock as “a set of internalized concepts that regulate our progression through the age-related milestones of the adult years” (p. 408). Nontraditional students tend to feel out of sync with their social clocks because college is something a person is supposed to do right after high school and as such they may feel out of place on college campuses (Inman & Mays, 1999; O’Conor, 2009; Saunders & Bauer, 2009). Even the younger participants in this study who were between the ages of 25 to 30 felt this. TT, who is 28, said:

It is a little bit culture shock being surrounded by people 10 to 11 years younger than me. I just feel, I don’t want to say superior, it just feels I’m completely separated by – I don’t know how to explain how I feel separate, I just feel like I don’t belong with them and I just don’t really interact with them.

EE who is 30 said about coming back to school, “I was really stressed out more than the first time. I would ask myself what am I doing? I shouldn’t be doing this cause I’m a lot older... There’s been times when I felt like an old fuddy duddy.” JA who is 26 said, “I feel sometimes so much out of place because a lot of the students are younger.” This quote from BB, age 30, really illustrates the sense of being out of sync with his social clock:

I feel like when you come back there’s kind of like this feeling like you have to almost fight for validity. It’s like you feel like you don’t really belong because it’s like you missed your window, so you really have to fight for that.

Needless to say, these feelings were also expressed by the nontraditional students over 30. When asked if she ever felt out of place because of her age, PK said:

A little bit. Sometimes it seems like the young kids know where they're going. I mean I have some ideas, but I feel like I'm still the new little first year college student not sure of what I want to do.

Even though RE, age 61, commented that he did not necessarily feel out place because of his age, he also said, "The only sense is sometimes I think that they [traditional students] look at me like 'why are you doing this.'" When asked how it was being an older student on campus, SA, age 40, said "It's tough. It's getting easier. There's been some circumstances you know, I don't want to say I've been discriminated against, I felt that way." When asked to clarify why he felt discriminated against, SA explained that he had joined student government and felt that he was being treated differently than the younger students and was not getting the same training and information that they were. WH, age 31, said that being on a college campus was "...stressful and overwhelming because it felt like I was out of place. I was not a true freshman, I'm a little bit older than the majority of people in my class."

It is not just on campus where the sense of being out of sync with one's social clock is felt. Sometimes family and friends question why the person has chosen to enroll college and make comments like "you're too old" or "why would you want to do that now?" LC's mother does not understand why she wanted to go back to school because she already has a bachelor's degree. LC remembers her response to the news was something like "the older you get the more unmarketable you are." RE said that his children questioned his decision to go back to school. One son asked him, "Why are you doing this, you don't need this?"

Because nontraditional students are out of sync with the age-related social norm that suggests individuals should attend college right after high school, the timing of their enrollment as students older than the traditional college population contributes to them feeling out of place on a college campus.

Control. In evaluating the situation of a transition, it is also important to consider how much control the individual has over the transition (Goodman, et al., 2006). In transitioning to college, participants were in control of the decision to enroll. What they do not have control of is things like financial aid policies, the various aspects of the admissions process, some of the enrollment requirements such as taking the Alcohol Edu and Sexual Assault Prevention classes that are mandatory. They are assigned their advisors rather than getting to choose them. BB said, “I really would love it if you could choose your advisor. Because I felt like I was given bad advice.” Although they can select their classes, they don’t have control of their availability, when they are offered or in some cases, the delivery format. For example, JV reported that he struggles with online classes and yet, many of the courses in his major are only offered online. He commented, “That’s the problem [that the courses are only offered online]... In the future I’m going to try and stay away from online classes as much as possible.”

Role change. The next aspect to consider is whether the transition involved a role change. For some participants it involved a complete role change, for others it involved adding a role. Participants AD, BB, EE, LC, MJ, NT, PVL, SH, and SW added the role of student into their existing lives while continuing with their role as employees, parents,

partners, etc. The remaining participants experienced significant role changes. JHM went from being a fulltime worker to becoming a fulltime student and along with that became the primary caretaker of his children. JA, JV, TT, and KW transitioned from military careers to becoming fulltime students. IB, JHF, PW, PK, RE, SA and TK left established careers to become students and WH transitioned from being incarcerated to becoming a student.

Much as the research suggests, for those who added the role of student to their existing lives, the themes generally had to do with trying to balance their competing demands. For AD, a key issue was finding enough time to spend with his partner who expressed to him that he was feeling neglected. For BB, the biggest challenge was balancing his fulltime job with being a full time and student and finding time for self-care. EE, LC, NT, PVL, SH and SW struggled with finding adequate time to spend with their spouses and/or children. Those transitioning from fulltime employment expressed a variety of challenges related to their role change. IB, who had been working fulltime as a plumber said:

It's [the transition to college] just been big for me because you know I've been in a job working with men who are like 30 plus years old and blue collar kinda guys and I come back here and I feel like I'm surrounded by kids you know and people in their own little social groups and their own little styles and cliques and all that. So that is weird for me because I feel like it's high school."

JA had been an NCO in the Marines and was used to having the younger recruits defer to him said:

As a 22-year-old corporal, I had 18, 19, 20-year old's going to parade rest to me. To even talk to me they had to say a proper greeting, it was a whole

different world. I had to adjust to that, to become friendly again just to young guys.

JV, who had retired from the Navy after 20 years encountered a different challenge. He was used to being told what to do and when to do it and now suddenly the decisions were left up to him. He stated, "It's a huge piece, because of 23 years of having my motivation kicked in the teeth." For JHF, PK, RE and TK, the main challenge with the role change was learning to be a student again after years of working. JHF sums it up in her statement, "I have to understand that now my nights and weekends aren't free anymore and I can't just go and do the things that I was doing before leisurely or socially."

Duration. In terms of duration of this transition to college, it is temporary and one that will lead to further transitions as they move through and transfer to four-year campuses or graduate and enter into new careers. If they withdraw from school before completing their goals, they may end up returning to previous careers and roles.

Previous experience. In assessing previous experience with similar transitions, 17 of the participants had been enrolled in college at some previous time. Five of those 17 had graduated with degrees. Of the remaining 12, who had some experience with college, 11 had enrolled right after high school and eight had reported doing poorly, attributing this mainly to lack of maturity and/or not having a sense of purpose. Interestingly, those students with previous college experience expressed similar challenges with their initial transition as those who had no previous experience in higher education. LC who already had a bachelor's degree said:

In my biology class that I started in the summer I was very scared because I was like, I'm going to be the oldest one there... I was terrified of being there in the first place and I made the comment that I was very nervous coming back to school.

Similarly SA who had never attended college said: "It's been a struggle. One of the most difficult things that I've attempted in my entire life and I'm still transitioning after five weeks."

Concurrent Stress. Also important in evaluating the situation, is considering concurrent stress which is unique to each participant. AD's stress came from a lack of support from his partner and major health issues that could flare up at any time, as well as an ongoing struggle with depression. BB worked fulltime as a certified nurse assistant and as a tutor in the Academic Success Center as well as being a fulltime student. EE commuted back and forth between Helena, where her husband and children live, and Great Falls each week. IB's family members had health issues that reportedly were a factor in his dropping out. JHF had moved from Bozeman to Great Falls leaving her support system behind and needed to adjust to a new community. KW faced being separated from her spouse and children along with needing to make new childcare arrangements. LC's mother was injured in a fall and had to move in with her, thus requiring her to add the role caretaker and in her second semester, LC found out she was pregnant with her second child. PW was hospitalized near the end of the semester and had to withdraw from classes losing those credits. PVL's work shifts continually changed impacting her studies. Just as he started his first semester, SA's wife was laid off from her job. SH's mother in Arizona became sick and she had to travel there unexpectedly.

SW had family members come to visit. WH's stress came from being on probation and being in an on again off again relationship with a woman struggling with addiction and it should be noted WH was himself in recovery. This quote from AD provides an example of concurrent stress:

Since the last time I saw you, my grandmother's been in the hospital, had a heart attack, 5 stents. She's been in and out [of the hospital], she's had bleeding, she's on oxygen. So, my cousin from Billings who is a nurse, is basically living at my parent's house and that's so much stress on her and on my mom, so I'm trying to take some of that stress on... We took on shifts, my mom my cousin and myself.

As this quote illustrates, it is evident that concurrent stress adds another layer of difficulty to being a student and depending on the type of stressor, can interfere with being able to remain enrolled as in the case of LC who found out she was pregnant. The remaining participants did not identify any out of the ordinary stressors other than those associated with being student and their other roles.

Attitude. Finally, in evaluating the situation of the transition, it is important to assess the attitude of the person towards the transition. In this study, each participant initially had a positive attitude towards the transition even if they were finding it challenging. They were consistently excited about being enrolled in college and seeing where that could lead. In follow-up interviews, the majority continued to have a positive view. The exception was PW whose attitude towards GFCMSU specifically became negative because she had not been able to take incompletes in her classes after falling ill and being hospitalized. She stated, "They let me withdraw but wouldn't give me any

money back. Thousands of dollars because of a medical condition where I couldn't finish... It leaves a bad taste in your mouth. I really think it's just this school."

Certainly, aspects of the self which will be explored in the next section play a key role in how the situation is assessed both initially and as students move through their education.

Self

In exploring the "Self," Goodman et al. (2006), feel it is important to consider the individual's strengths and weaknesses as well as their overall life view – is it optimistic or pessimistic. They identified the following characteristics as important factors in how individuals navigate change in their lives:

- Personal & demographic characteristics
- Socioeconomic status
- Gender
- Age and stage of life
- State of health
- Ethnicity/Culture
- Psychological resources including;
 - Ego development
 - Outlook – optimism and self-efficacy
 - Commitment and values
 - Spirituality and resilience (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 65)"

Personal and demographic characteristic, gender and age, can be reviewed by viewing Table 1 in Chapter 3. Based on the information given regarding finances, the majority of participants fall into middle or lower middle class. The one exception was PK, who at her second interview identified significant financial issues and probably falls below the poverty line. As far as ethnicity and culture, two participants identify as Hispanic, one as Native American and the remaining participants identify as white. Several of the participants had significant medical problems: AD had been diagnosed with Guillain Barre Syndrome as well as back problems; PW had intestinal problems; PK expressed having health problems but did not specify what they were. Through other sources on campus I learned that PK was in recovery but had relapsed and began drinking during the semester. A number of participants disclosed that they had a history of mental health issues. AD and BB both disclosed that they struggled with depression and JHF has a history of anxiety. JA had been depressed following his discharge from the military and also had a period of abusing both alcohol and opioids which he stated was now under control. WH discussed being in recovery for seven months and was maintaining his sobriety and seeing both an addictions and mental health counselor, but he did not disclose any specific mental health issues. Both financial and health issues of these participants could easily interfere with these students persisting. PK was dealing with both which put her at even greater risk. Their health issues could easily become acute and disrupt their enrollment as occurred for PW when being hospitalized with intestinal problems interfered with her being able to complete semester. How the participants coped with these issues was directly related to their psychological resources.

Goodman et al., (2006) define Psychological Resources as “personality characteristics that people draw upon to help them withstand threats” (p.69). The interviews were coded based the types of psychological resources identified by Goodman et al., (2006) including ego development, outlook, self-efficacy, commitment, spirituality and resiliency.

Ego Development. Ego development is the level of maturity of the individual. According to Goodman et al. (2006), individuals with a low level of ego development tend to be conformists and rule followers and in contrast those with a high level of ego development are more autonomous, able to think critically and tolerate ambiguity. Here are some examples of participants demonstrating higher levels of ego development. AD said, “I feel a sense of ownership in the school that gives me the power to say [to an instructor], wait a minute, that’s not quite working for us.” BB in comparing his current enrollment to when he was a younger student said that younger people see teachers as “supreme leaders.” He no longer has this viewpoint and feels comfortable in approaching and questioning them. JA had been in a leadership role in the Marines and was used to ordering younger soldiers around, so needing to ask a younger student for help in his chemistry class made him extremely uncomfortable, but he was able to tolerate this and ask for the help he needed. TT who had been in the Air Force said, “

But my personality coming from the military is do what’s right, no matter what. If you get in trouble for it, it’s better to ask for forgiveness sometimes than for permission, to take measure and take care of the situation.”

A few of the participants made statements that reflected lower levels ego development. JHF continually puts pressure on herself based on where she thinks she

should be and worries when things don't go according to the plans set by the instructors.

SA, in explaining why he took a part-time job that he really didn't need, said:

I was waiting for class and I noticed somebody that walked by recognized me and his name is Milo, he's a supervisor up there and he asked me "do you need a job" and when I'm offered work, I'm just used to saying yes.

In TK's case, her level of ego development was impacting her ability to understand what she was learning in math class. She said:

So, then that's probably my biggest fear, I'm afraid I'm going to do it wrong and not understand it. So, I need to know that it's OK, you can do it that way or that way or you can do it in that way. I wasn't understanding that it's OK as long as you come out with the answer, how you get it is OK.

Outlook. The transcriptions were examined for themes related to the participants' outlook, in other words are they optimists or pessimists and do they have a positive or negative explanatory style for the events that occur in their lives (Goodman et al., 2006). Most of participants demonstrated optimism along with a positive explanatory style. Both AD and BB who had done poorly during their previous enrollments saw being in school and their ability to succeed in a positive light. IB saw himself as someone who is able to push through difficult circumstances and find solutions. JHM got a 74 on his first lab test and saw that as a positive in that he had passed and now could look for ways to improve his score. KW expressed the importance of staying positive in the face of adversity and PVL expressed how grateful she is for all that she has. SW also started off doing poorly her first semester back and saw it as an opportunity to make changes to her priorities and study habits. WH said, "...thinking

negative leads to negative outcomes. If a negative situation comes across my life, I look for the positive because where there is a negative there's a positive.”

JHF was a mix of both negative and positive. She is continually gauging herself and comparing herself to others and finds herself lacking. She admits to a serious lack of self-confidence and even her peers and instructors have given her this feedback. She does look for positive people to surround herself with and recognizes how draining negativity is. She is positive in her outlook that she can learn.

Three of the participants expressed sentiments indicative of negative explanatory style. JV was negative about his ability to do well in school and blames it on online classes not being a good fit for himself rather than taking a positive approach and learning from his poor performance. The most negative explanatory style was reflected in PW and permeated throughout her interviews. She made numerous negative comments about the unfairness of life and made disparaging remarks about traditionally aged students. She perceived campus staff as being rude and not wanting to help her in her situation where she had to withdraw and placed blamed on the campus for her failures.

Self-Efficacy. Closely related to outlook is self-efficacy, defined by Bandura as, “... people’s beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own motivations and behaviors and over environmental demands” (as cited in Goodman, et al., 2006, p. 71). In coding the interviews, I found participants demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy. A prime example was the number of participants who talked about the importance of good time management in being successful. BB, KW, EE, LC, SH, JHF,

JHM, RE, NT, SA and SW all addressed how important setting up schedules that allotted time for school work as well their other responsibilities was critical to their success. In contrast both JV and PW talked about procrastinating and not setting specific time aside for schoolwork. JV self-reported that he was not performing well academically, acknowledges that he needs to set a study schedule, but lacks the motivation to do it.

Recognizing the need to seek help was also a key theme. JHF, AD and WH showed insight in recognizing when they needed help with mental health issues. RE, TK, PK, JA, IB, LC, SH, and SW mentioned seeking help with academics. Numerous other statements were made that illustrated that almost all the participants felt they were in control of their success as a student. BB said, "I know what I want and I'm willing to put in the work to achieve that." JHM recognizes that he is solution oriented and stated, "So I don't allow problems out of my control to stress me over and the ones I can control, I fix them... You get from something what you put into it." RE discussed doing consistently worse on his lab exams, stating "that bugs me, but I'm trying to think of other ways that I can combat it." SW, who is applying to the highly competitive dental hygiene program, said "I probably plan too much but it's laying out what classes to take, what I need to fix and improve and where I can add other points."

In contrast, both PW and JV made comments indicating low levels of self-efficacy. PW said, "You're not in control any more of lots of things," and tends to blame others for her life circumstances. JV expressed wanting others to set deadlines for him to help motivate him. and stated, "I want the end product without all the work, but that's

just not going to happen.” JHF again shows a mix in that she has some areas where she demonstrates strong levels of self- efficacy but when it comes to school feels like she has little control. She stated,

My stress level is on its way back up again which is frustrating, it’s a lack of feeling in control. Like in clinic you can’t control anything and so, that’s what’s hard and my anxiety level is going up...Anytime something is new for me it freaks me out.

Her fear of new things seems rooted in her lack of belief in her ability to carry out what is required. In contrast, she did reach out for help in managing her anxiety and shows insight into her need for self-care when her stress increases. She recognizes that she has the control to take those steps by doing things like scheduling a massage, regularly exercising and making social connections.

Commitment. Students persisting in school takes a high level of commitment. Goodman et al. (2006) suggest that where one’s commitment lies also determines their level of vulnerability during transitions. They identify four areas of commitment: interpersonal, altruism, competence/mastery and self-protection (Goodman et al., 2006). In coding the interviews, some students’ commitment to education stemmed from only one of the areas, yet others described multiple areas. By far, the greatest number of participants, 16 in total, identified competence/mastery as the key commitment behind their educational goal. BB, JA, AD, NT and SA enrolled because that wanted better career opportunities. JHM stated, “I can’t be stagnant...I want to learn, I want to move forward.” EE said, “I care more, the end goal is important.” IB said, “I’ve always done what I had to do because I had to survive. So, this goes back to me wanting something for

me.” AD said, “I want to succeed.” LC, PVL, RE and SH saw themselves as being goal oriented and wanting to learn and achieve. MJ enrolled for the fun of learning, stating, “there’s so many things to learn.”

Seven participants’ commitment was motivated by altruism. AD who wants to become a medical assistant said, “I need to do something that contributes to the world in a positive way.” JHM who was going into nursing, found his calling after helping the victim of a car accident, stating, “From that instant, I had more gratification from giving this woman an opportunity to live and that trumped anything I had ever done in my 30 some years of existence.” PVL who is also going into nursing said “Like I’d rather just love people. Like the elderly homes, nobody wants to go there, but I love old people. But there’s more to medicine than changing them, I’m just like I want to love them.” PW who wants to be a nurse said, “I was in the hospital and I realize that they’re the people who really make a difference to their patients and I want to do that.” TK who is considering nursing said, “I really like people and I think I’m really good with people and kids. I like older people too, so I thought that nursing would be a really good fit for me and a challenge.” TT wants to be a physical therapy assistant because of his desire to help people and WH who first enrolled with the goal of becoming a civil engineer said, “I believe I’m going to switch it to social worker, so I can help guide youth in any possible way. And to give back...”

Six participants identified their relationships as playing a key role in their commitment. For AD, it was his connection to the other students in student government and wanting to build a better life for himself and his partner that was important. KW said,

“I’m here for my family, so we don’t have to live paycheck to paycheck or we can go do fun things and not worry about stuff so much.” LC said,

I want my baby to know her mom could do it... I want my baby to know that if she works hard she can have things. I want her to see that education is important and that her mom and dad are a family and we support each other.

SA who has a 3-year old daughter said, “I want to lead by example.” SW, who was acutely aware of the sacrifices her family has made for her to go to college stated,

My drive is a lot more intense to make sure I do it right the first time, so I don’t have to spend twice the time away from those that I care about...My family, they’ve given up so much so I can chase a dream and achieve my goals.

WH stated, “I want my son to be proud of who I am.”

Within the interviews, themes related to the final area self-protection/survival which relates to satisfying immediate needs were not identified. This makes sense if one considers that being successful in college requires students to be able to delay gratification on regular basis.

Spirituality. Four of the participants identified spirituality and their faith as an important resource for them. PVL put it this way, “I’m very into God and if I didn’t pray, I wouldn’t have a straight head.” RE said, “The only reason I’m alive is because of my faith. My faith in Jesus Christ. That gives me a base...” SA reported that he has not been spiritual in the past and is currently pursuing spiritual help, but he did not elaborate. Finally, WH said, “Just to keep that spiritual foundation for myself I believe is one thing actually is the biggest thing that is getting me by day to day.” WH is actively involved in

12 step programs and relies heavily on his spiritual foundation for maintaining his sobriety.

Resilience. Much research has been conducted on resilience. Goodman et al., (2006) describe resilient people as those “Who are able to weather a storm in their lives, bounce back from adversity, or grow stronger in the face of adversity” (p.74). In examining the themes that emerged from the participants there are numerous examples of resilience. AD overcame an arrest record and jumped through the necessary hoops to enroll in college. He did poorly during his first enrollment and is on academic probation as a result, but he does not let that deter him. He also has a serious medical issue (Guillain Barre Syndrome) which can flare up at any time but when he has had to miss class, he bounced back and caught up with his work. LC’s mother was injured in a fall and came to live with her and her family. LC had to add the role of caretaker to her other roles, including wife, mother, student and full-time employee and is more determined than ever to not let this change interfere with her education. EE is at the point in her education where she is losing motivation, but she says, “It’s important to push through it,” and she does. BB is another student who had D’s and F’s on his transcript from his first enrollment and is now an excellent student, even tutoring other students in the Academic Success Center. This year he won the award for tutor of the year. IB was kicked out of his parents’ home when he was sixteen but found employment and survived. At age 25, he got his GED and a friend inspired him to enroll in college. Despite struggling with anxiety and lack of confidence, JHF continually puts one foot in front of the other and persists. She earned A’s and B’s during her first year of the dental

hygiene program. KW, whose children live in another state, struggled with depression after a visit to see them over Christmas and this was temporarily reflected in her grades, but using positive self-talk, she pushed herself up and got back on track by reminding herself why she was doing this and recognizing the situation was short-term. Like several others, PVL was not a good student during an earlier enrollment in college, but she is now excelling and getting good grades. PK is rebuilding her life after getting out of an abusive relationship. RE bounces back and looks for new strategies when he does poorly on an exam or assignment. When SA gets discouraged he looks at his grades and what he has accomplished and continues his effort to finish strong. SH went into a depression after her last child left home but has pulled herself out of it and found a new sense of purpose by enrolling in college. SW had a meltdown because she was feeling overwhelmed, but she sought support and got back on track. Finally, WH is attending college while still on parole and dealing with legal issues and he has achieved seven months of sobriety.

It is not surprising that so many themes of strong psychological resources were identified from these participants. By the time they came in for second and/or third interviews, 18 of the 22 participants were in the process of successfully moving through their education. PW had withdrawn due to medical issues, but re-enrolled for the spring semester, JV was unsure whether he would pass his classes, NT decided to withdraw for the semester and re-enroll in the welding program the following term and IB had simply stopped attending. The psychological resources exhibited by these participants are

evident in the types of strategies these individuals use to cope with the stress of being a student.

Strategies

Individuals employ different strategies to manage their stress that generally fall into three categories: changing the situation, redefining the problem, or managing their stress (Goodman, et al., 2006). Coping strategies include problem focused instrumental approaches which focus on changing the situation and emotional focused palliative approaches which serve to decrease emotional distress (Goodman, et al., 2006). Thus, changing the situation would be considered a problem focused strategy. Redefining the problem and managing stress fall into the category of emotionally focused changes. The strategy an individual uses depends on whether or not they have the power to change a situation or at least aspects of that situation. When they perceive they lack power to change a situation, they resort to emotionally focused strategies.

Changing the Situation. Goodman et al., (2006) suggest that changing the situation involves any response that modifies the source of the stress and includes: negotiation, optimistic action, self-reliance including help seeking behaviors when needed, and exercise of potency (p.80). Significant themes emerged that demonstrated these types of problem focused strategies during the moving in and moving through phases of the participants' transition to college.

The theme that emerged most frequently would fall under the category of self-reliance, the willingness to ask for help either from their instructors, tutors in the

Academic Success Center or their peers. Fourteen of the 22 participants identified using this strategy. Here are their comments:

BB: Well I think that was one of the big problems I had before too [referring to his previous enrollment in college] because I was like, well they're [instructors] busy, but this time I want to succeed so much, I feel like that's [asking for help] really important and needs to be a driving factor...

IB: Oh, that's where you just gotta be honest with yourself, just like with school, if you need help, just ask for help...

JA: When it comes to asking for help and stuff, I am very prideful especially when there's other younger kids, I don't want to. Now I don't care because I adjusted.

LC: I'm not afraid, I feel comfortable asking for help and they're [instructors] very responsive.

NT: I use the ASC quite a bit, especially for math.

PW: I used disability services. She's a been very helpful in getting accommodations for my testing time and having a quiet and non-distractive environment is huge.

PK: Yeah, I'm pretty resourceful, I know where to get help... I usually went to the ASC and asked for help along the way.

RE: I'm... going to the resource room [ASC], I spend 90% of time at that resource room. If I'm not in class, I'm picking their brains and go over stuff making sure I've done it right.

SA: (In response to whether he asked eLearning for help with technology): Yes, that includes their help. I think that one thing you need to know is the right questions to ask.

SH: And, I'm not afraid to ask questions...I'll email my professors with questions.

SW: No, I'm all for help. You suffer when you don't' ask when you need something. There's no point in making things harder because you're too proud to ask.

TK: I have [asked for help]. I run around like a little chicken you know. Do you know what I should do? Find the right person to ask the question. And then that usually gets you somewhere to another person that can answer the question.

WH: And now I'm coming out of my shell and asking for help.

One participant, JHM, found a different approach because he was reluctant to ask instructors or use the ASC for help, rather he created study groups with his peers in his classes, stating, "So that's really helping me helping 8 other people with it [Math]. Same thing with my human bio class. My human bio class, you know I start 'come into open lab with me, come study with me.'"

Similarly, students were not afraid to ask for help in managing their other responsibilities.

SW: I have neighbors, bless their sweet souls, that are stay at home moms and if we're in a pickle and need someone to watch her, I can quick call and send her next door. I don't have to worry, I can have kid free study time which makes a difference

PVL: My husband is huge in helping me with stress. Helping me relieve some things, cleaning the house, like little things like tasks that I need to do and he does it for me like shopping when I'm studying... Even before I started going to school we had this conversation about how things are going to be.

LC (speaking about her husband): Oh gosh he is so supportive...like when I have tests and homework he watches our daughter so I can get that stuff done.

KW: So, at the moment we're married but we're [living] separate so we can go school and get our stuff done. My son is 2 and our daughter will be 4 in November and they are with their dad in Washington now... He was like it's your turn, you go school, get your stuff and then after two years we'll both graduate the same summer.

Four of the students also identified seeking help with mental health issues as critical to their ability to cope.

AD: Being able to recognize that the situation was not good, and being very aware of the fact that I am sleeping and this is a sign of depression where it's like I don't want to do my favorite things... That's what I need, a psychology tune-up so I'm going to... So, I'll go to my therapist and I'm on all my meds.

JHF (Following an incident in class): So I go to get the needle and it's in a plastic case and I go to retract it and I see how long the needle is and I'm bringing it over my patient's eyes and she opens her mouth and as soon as I go to go in there I'm like, oh my gosh, I started shaking, so I pull out of her mouth, and I'm just like this and I'm like what do I do. My instructor actually had to come over and had to hold my wrist because I was shaking so bad. I don't know if I'm at the point where I need to get on medication. I don't really want to, but I don't want that to happen again in class.

WH: ... I learned how to deal with stress in my treatment.

PW: So, when I was having just kinda some outside trouble, some health problems, she [Disability Services Director] helped me find a counselor to talk things over with. It was really helpful.

Thus, being able to ask for help, whether it is with studies or with personal health issues is an important coping strategy identified by a majority of the participants.

Another theme that emerged would fall under the strategy referred to as “optimistic action.” Several students discovered shortly after they enrolled that their lives had become unmanageable and as a result they decided to remain in school but withdraw from one or more classes. Here is what these students had to say:

AD: Like this semester has been difficult – I'm taking psychology and I'm taking nutrition and I was taking human biology and withdrew with a 50% because I spent 3 days in a panic because we had 15 weeks of class, and labs were on Monday's and 5 vacation Monday's and so they were trying to cram so much and I was like there's no way I can do this and I wasn't going to lose my GPA, so I withdrew.

PVL: Yeah, so I definitely feel like this semester I feel a little overwhelmed. Maybe I shouldn't have jumped like all in. Or maybe more part time. We just bought a house, our first house so doing that, the whole move, setting that up, getting my new job, adjusting... So, I was enrolled in 12 credits, I did drop my anatomy 2 class.

SH: I started off with 12 [credits]. And I ended up dropping down to 9. Twelve credits was just too much with my fulltime job... I wanted to have something to keep my me busy and occupy my mind, but I was so busy I wasn't enjoying myself. So, I opted to drop down and it was perfect.

Time management was also a frequent theme among participants which falls under the solution-oriented category of "exercising potency versus helpless resignation" (Goodman, et al, 2006, p. 80). Students stressed how critical time management was in helping them be successful.

AD: And learning how to balance your time... you need to balance time somewhere in there for you, for self-care.

BB: Keeping everything on a time schedule like is for me so crucial. I think I showed you my schedule. I have to totally break everything up and then spend the allotted time.

JHM: So Tuesdays and Thursdays are my easy days. Mondays and Wednesdays are my busy days when I'm here from 10:00 to 2:15... Tuesday's it's lab class and it gets over at 11:50, so I have until 1;00 to study... Thursday is a lecture so it's only like 10 to 10:50 and where it's the same thing. I'm here and I dedicate that time to being here ... (note: he details his daily schedule and additional times he spends on his studies).

KW: I'm off [from work] Sunday, Monday, Tuesdays. Monday's, I don't have classes, so Sunday and Monday s are my sit down get everything done days. I have a white board at home and I write down all the stuff that's going to be due, all the stuff I need to get done before Sunday or Monday morning. I put down what days they're due. So those are pretty much the only two days I have to study.

SH: I go to work at 6:30 in the morning most of the time and the I get off work by 3 or 3:30. So I can go home and for me to relax I do schoolwork... I try to have it done before the weekend, so that my weekend is about totally disengaging from everything.

Also falling under the category of “Optimistic Action” (Goodman, et al., 2006) several participants discussed having more than one plan to resolve any given situation. At her first interview KW, shared how her husband was taking care of the children in Washington State with the help of his brother. By the second interview, due to a pending change in the brother’s employment, he would no longer be able to help with the childcare, thus KW was considering bringing the children to live in Montana. When asked about this, KW stated, “Oh yeah, I have plan A, B, C, D, all the way to Z,” and went on to explain the different ways she could arrange childcare with family members who live in Montana. SW had a similar strategy for getting accepted into the Dental Hygiene Program. She said, “I have my backup plan so if I don’t get in I have like steps over the next year to add and fix things to make sure I get accepted the next go around. Similarly, AD who is hoping to get into the medical assisting program said,

It’s like I tell them my back up is that I know I may not get into the medical assisting, but I know there’s nursing, there’s like prerequisites that can go to nursing. You need to set yourself up. Don’t get stuck because you never know. You might need to divert for a while before you get into that program. Have A, B, C and D plans.

Two participants also recognized that their lifestyle habits were not in their best interests and made significant changes.

SA: One of the other changes I made was I stopped all poisons. I had a marijuana habit, I also had a nicotine habit that had been going for 30years. The marijuana habit for 2-3 years. I no longer poison myself with nicotine, marijuana or alcohol...I haven’t had a cigarette since Dec. 31, 2017... I drink tons of water. I added magnesium and fish oil and men’s daily vitamins. I also found this plate that has a diagram of the food groups and I’ve changed my diet. I make sure that I have a well-proportioned diet.

WH: I've learned that if you don't eat or sleep right, that it goes rough. That nutrition is a vital part of the human brain and anatomy to be able to function and pay attention in class. I learned if you don't get enough sleep or too much sleep that can also play a factor in how well you do. Staying hydrated with water rather than soda or any other like energy drinks, coffee. All that caffeine all because you get that sugar rush and you get the sugar come down and get tired. I learned that too in the last couple of weeks. I learned to eat less candy, drink more water, less caffeine.

Redefining the Problem. When participants are unable change the situation, as suggested by Goodman et al., (2006), they cope by redefining to the problem to "cognitively neutralize the threat" (p.80). There are a variety of examples of ways in which participants redefine the problem. JHM, SW and RE reframe failure as an opportunity to learn and improve.

JHM: It was a huge wakeup. I was like I passed, and I can improve from there. I'll take a 74 anytime, that's a good baseline. I have never been afraid to fail even like at work.... So it's just finding what works for myself and going with it... Once I got that 74, I was like I know the information, I just gotta spell and the next one I got an 84 on.

RE: On the first one [lab quiz] I got a 91, and it's been going down ever since. I got a 67 on my last one. That bugs me, but I'm trying to think of other ways that I can combat it. I go down and spend time in open lab and use that.

SW: And I ended up retaking the class [math] because my procrastination was so bad, but learned from that point that you don't procrastinate, you get it done.

Participants often redefine the problem by building on previous successes.

AD (After completing his first semester): Never in my life have I even gotten a 2.0 even close in school, so this is a huge accomplishment for me to get a 3.43. Next semester, I want a 4.5 minimum, so I can get on the dean's list. Well I have to take 12 credits to get on the dean's list. But you know what, I still know if I had 12 credits, I could do it.

JHF (After successfully completing her first semester in the Dental Hygiene Program): It feels awesome. I feel like what an accomplishment. I did want to get better grades, but at the same time, the grades I have are really good grades. They're not all A's, but they're A's and B's and I'm pretty happy about that. I was pretty worried about one of my classes and it turned out just fine. I think overall it's just a really good feeling of accomplishment.

EE (Comparing this college experience to her previous enrollment after high school): I did a lot better than before. I think I had one B and the rest were all A's so for me it was a really surprising change. It was like oh look if you study and work hard you can actually get good grades.

JHM (When asked how he felt about completing his first semester): Way better than expected. Out of my three classes the lowest grade I have is an 85%. So, it's going well. (I asked if that was building his confidence) Very much so.

Along similar lines, normalizing experiences helps some students cope.

JHF (when faced with seeing her first patient in the Dental Hygiene Program): Well and the seniors told us that they hear from other people who have gone through the program, that really you just don't know what you're doing until about the summer semester. And then kinda once you get through that you find your groove and you realize what you're supposed to be doing, but until then, you're flying by the seat of your pants and you have to get used to that.

SA: There's been a couple times this semester where I was hitting the bottom and I'd come to class and she [the instructor] mentions OK guys, this is the point in the semester where bottoms happen, and I was like phew, good thing this is normal.

Participants also cope by changing negative self-talk into positive self-talk.

AD: There were a few rough spots where I worried myself if I could do it. And then you need a little self-talk, a little pity party as I like to call it Ok, quit being a whiney little bitch, get in and get up and shower and get there and then when I get here I feel better.

JHF: I kinda feel in a way like I can handle the stress a little bit better. I think back then if something unexpected happened it would just send me into panic mode and now if something unexpected happens I kinda like well that's the way things have been going. I've been dealing with that

every time and it was just fine, so it will be just fine. I keep kind of reassuring myself, just keep doing what you're doing, it's working.

WH: I've just got to be positive about the whole thing. I don't think negative anymore. Thinking negative only leads to negative outcomes. So, the best I can do is stay positive. If a negative situation comes across my life, I look for the positive because wherever there's a negative there's a positive.

Focusing on the fact that the sacrifices that accompany going to school as well as school itself are time-limited and that breaks are coming, is a frequent cognitive strategy employed by participants.

KH (regarding being separated from her children): I know it's temporary.

EE (regarding coping until end of the schoolyear): I have a pretty serious mental countdown. It's like 6 more months. I am very time oriented... It's a way of keeping your sanity. Like it's less than a pregnancy – I can make it.

SW (talking about the sacrifices regarding her family): I know it's hard on him [husband], but we try to make sure during the summer that we have something to look forward to...so we just try to do something fun. Go travel and visit family in another state, or go camping... Like I'm counting the weeks. I know where it is and I'm like oh my gosh is it that close?

In some instances, participants redefine the situation by ignoring or minimizing the source of stress and/or focusing on positive aspects of their lives.

AD (has a partner who is not supportive of his going to school): It's [school] my drug right now. I want to succeed. Student government is like my family so it keeps me coming back, keeps me responsible, keeps me accountable and gives me a sense of purpose.

IB (discussing a 1 credit class with more homework than his other classes): There's other people that are really bitching about the work, but it goes back to you've got to get it done.

KW: ...I keep myself busy for sure, plus it is kind of like a mental distraction so that I don't worry about my kids and what's going on at home.

JHM: I'm really solution oriented. So, I don't allow problems out of my control to stress over... Oh humor's a huge coping factor for me... I use humor a lot in hard times, I find ways to laugh and brush it off. That's my coping mechanism.

For one participant, ignoring the problem was done in a manner that was detrimental to the individual.

JV (speaking about struggling with motivation and being easily distracted): And set aside a work space so I can study in the work space and not be affected by TV or internet or whatever. What really sucks is when the class involves the internet, I'm prone to go off doing other things.

Managing Stress. When a situation can't be changed, or cognitive methods are not used or effective, Goodman et al, (2006) identified a third method to manage stress through learning to "accommodate to existing stress without being overwhelmed by it" (p.80). This is accomplished through various coping responses and a number of participants were able to identify very specific ways they cope with their stress. The key theme that emerged in this category was self-care strategies. Here is what the participants had to say about engaging in self-care:

AD: Like get a bath bomb and take a bath and disconnect completely from school and from life. Talk to yourself, to your soul, to your mind, to your feelings and express them and get them out somehow... In the COLS class, the journals, they're really helpful. Because taking whatever the anxiety or problem is from here to a piece of paper removes that anxiety.

BB: I think that one of them is like every week, I have to have a BB day. Like I have to show you a picture of my schedule because it's obnoxious, but there is like a 5 hour period where I can do for me, whether that's reading a book in the bathtub or going and playing dungeons and dragons with my friends because I am a nerd, or going to the movies or something that has nothing to do with school is so important, because otherwise you just get that burnout and it really does take a toll on your body and your mind.

JHF: I exercise a lot, go to the gym about 4 hours a week. I go twice a week for 2 hours at a time and I walk. On days when I don't go to the gym, I try to walk at least 2-3 times a week and when I walk, I walk about 5 miles... When I'm home I try to be really relaxed, I listen to music... I go onto YouTube, because I'm such a nature love, I'll look up like chirping birds anything that sounds like nature, like running water or thunderstorms or crackling fire and I'll let it play for an hour or two or three and just leave it running in the background. I've started using essential oils just to relax me.

KW: So they [the family members she lives with] have a German shorthaired pointer and there are days when I am just done and I'll go out back and play with her because I can't take anymore studying.

NT: One of the things that helps with my stress is that I spend 2 hours driving every day. One hour to drive into school and an hour driving home. I use that mainly, that's kind of my chill time to sit and listen to music or just kind rehash the day. I guess I talk to the steering wheel. And that helps being able to talk to myself. Aside from that I have a hobby as a blacksmith, so I do get a little opportunity to have that as sort of a creative outlet

PK: I live by the duck pond, so I go and feed the geese because that relaxes me... In the winter I still like to read... Oh and I do volunteer work... I do craft class... Another thing I have a big old fat cat at home that I love, that's one of my little stress things. I love that kitty.

PVL: I would say pray, because I'm very into God and if I didn't pray, I wouldn't have a straight head

RE: When I'm done [with the semester], I'll be going to Malta which is my hometown. I will go and be a mechanic and work for my brother-in-law, both his brothers have cows and I'll totally get away and then when I come back I'll be refreshed. That's how I handle the stress and when I go home at night, I'll hit the books and I'm up early and I think one of the ways I deal with stress is to read. I read a lot about my religion, I read a lot about history.

SA: I'm finding some balance. On the weekend I'm finding 3-4 hours to be strictly with my family.

SH: But I was able to make it so that I would be [finished with schoolwork by Thursday] because of my grandkids who are still my priority and I

didn't want to be tied down that way. So, I put a few extra hours in during the week, then I could have weekends to do what I wanted to do.

SW: It usually ends up like a 30-minute bubble bath – rarely. I try to do everything to make my time count and I worry about me time when the semester ends... then I cross stitch like crazy, I enjoy cross stitching and knitting. I vegged and watched TV, just nothing. I took a mental break where I just didn't have to think.

TK: I like to have one day where I gotta pay my bills and do my laundry and I can just stay in my kitchen and if I want to cook, it's just that one day that I don't have to worry about you have to get that book out or you have that homework assignment to do... Oh yeah then Sunday nights, I love to watch PBS... I get to watch TV on Sunday nights, that's my treat.

TT: I build models that are part of a giant table top board game called War Hammer...it's almost an addiction because it's just so fun for me... That was my stress coping either that or going to the gym. I'll mess with my hobby or hang out with my wife and it gets me through pretty good.

WH: I might just take a break and relax for 5 or 10 minutes and then I'll go back and do my work.... I can really just go and reflect on my day and relax and get the serenity that I need for the night or the day.

One participant who admitted to struggling with exceptionally high levels of anxiety in general would use rehearsal as a way to cope.

JHF: I know like with public speaking, it helps if I know what room it's going to be in and I practice. That helps a ton with my stress, with visualization that I'm doing it, that helps.

Sometimes even with self-care strategies, the stress becomes unmanageable, but for both students who reported that they had “meltdowns,” these actually served to help them regroup and regain their sense of balance in managing their stress.

AD: So recently as in 2 days ago I had a meltdown. A serious meltdown. I couldn't afford medications that I needed, so I was on nothing. I got mad that Nick [his partner] wasn't doing much. I felt defeated and school's my happy place, so when I go home I don't feel like I have a purpose or someone supporting me...So I had a meltdown, but the next day I had a doctor's appointment with my regular doctor and I melted down in her

office. So, I got back on antidepressants, I got back on my nerve medication. Oh, and she gave me some muscle relaxers... So, it just kind of worked out.

SW: I hit the tipping point last week actually and completely had a meltdown, fell apart in the middle of class. The perfect timing. It was just everything and then the realization that I had people coming [to visit for a week] and then I just fell apart... It was just so much. I'm OK now. It was one of those days where I just had to cry and multiple times I just let everything out and I bounced back and I'm OK now. I got it out of my system, so I'm good for the rest of the semester

Seeking support was another key strategy identified for managing stress, however since Goodman et al, (2006) consider "support" as a separate category under the four "S's," I will discuss support strategies utilized by participants in depth in the next section.

Support

Even in the initial emergent coding, having a support system, either on campus or at home, was a key theme in aiding participants' transition to college. Goodman et al., (2006) suggest that support has three aspects: affect, affirmation and aid (p.76). Affect consists of expressions of things like concern, encouragement, respect and love. Affirmation involves acknowledging and supporting the loved one's action of enrolling in college. Aid would be the practical ways in which support is offered, i.e. doing household chores, childcare, etc. In the following statements in which participants discuss their support systems, all three aspects occur.

AD, who reported struggles with the ongoing grind of school and has no encouragement from his partner, said this of his support network on campus:

It was mostly that core group of student government because a couple of people I graduated high school with and there were some new people, some younger and some older and some moms. A whole mix of people, and I needed to be there Wednesday morning for the student government meeting. So, my pity party would start on Thursday and end Wednesday because I had to get up and get there to that meeting.

He further explained how one of those students will text him if she does not see him at school. JA, a vet, found similar support through the Veterans Success Center on campus stating, “They encourage you, they know you by first name, they make sure you feel welcome.”

Spouses of service members are also invited to use the Vet Center. Here is what PVL, whose husband is in the Air Force, had to say when asked about support on campus:

PVL: I would say the number one thing that pops in my head is the way they help the military because I use the Veteran’s center a lot and even the free printing that’s like such a great thing for me to do my work. Free printing, free computer, also with the scholarship that you guys offer... I’m in there all the time.

JHF says of her classmate KW (another study participant), “She’s saved my goose so many times. We always sit next to each other in class, and I’m like I don’t get this, and she’ll explain it and I’m like – oh OK.” JHF, who moved to Great Falls to enroll in the dental hygiene has no other support system in town, making the connection with her classmate even more important. When she had an outbreak of hives, KW accompanied her to the ER and has overall been a significant factor in JHF’s successful transition.

BB and SW are also friends and in a study group. This is what they had to say about the importance of support.

BB: Definitely get plugged into the Academic Success Center for sure and also study groups... I'm usually with my [study] group and I'm either working on A&P or statistics.

SW (When asked what helped her adjust to being in college): Finding people who really study well within my classes. I think it was trial and error. The first class I really tried to do a study group with, it was kind of a bust of people. They didn't study, they just wanted to gossip. And luckily, I got in with BB who is studious and driven and it helps. It helps inspire you to be more driven because you want to put in as much as they do when you get together and study.

Rather than joining an existing study group, JHM led the way, creating study groups for his more difficult classes.

JHM: But you know my math class, I set up a study group with six people... So, I've got one for bio that we're starting too. So, I think for me having people and being able to talk it out with people that are in the same atmosphere as me I think is a better solution versus just sitting down with somebody [referring to tutors in the ASC]. I guess I don't know your people are, if they're teachers.

LC who enrolled in her first class during the summer semester spoke of the importance of making a connection during her very first day in class.

It was important, and I will never forget it, this 19-year-old bubbly, tiny little thing. I was terrified of being there in the first place and I made the comment that I was very nervous coming back to school. We were doing introductions and she turned around and she said, don't you worry, we got you. And you know what, she was at every single study session that we had. And that right there I will never forget her saying that because to me, she has no idea, it was kind like a life line.

PK, RE, WH and TK all found their support system in the Academic Success Center (ASC). Here is what they had to say:

PK (Speaking about the ASC): I was thinking about the ASC. I really like that place too because there are a lot of other older people in there and we've got commonalities and things like that. There's an older man, he's sort of – one of his sides, he's partially paralyzed and he often talks to me... It seems like everybody in there knows me by name.

WH: But what makes it very comfortable for me is that there's two individuals that are at the ASC that I graduated HS with and so I already know them on a one to one basis as well as there's another gentleman that's in two of my classes who is a year older than me which makes it more comfortable. And I also see a couple of people from the AA community, also one of them is a professor and the other one is a student, so it just makes me more comfortable.

RE: I'm going to the resource room [ASC]. I spend 90% of my time at that resource room if I'm not in class. I'm picking their brains and go over stuff, making sure I've done it right.

TK: And the study center [ASC] has been a big help too... So, I have a young gal lined up next semester to give me two hours a week, just one on one for math and make sure that I'm getting right... She works at the study center. So I asked her if she would have time. She's a student too.

Particularly for those students who juggle multiple role, their support system at home was critical.

KW (husband lives in another state and is caring for their children): In between the military and having kids he got deployed a couple of times and so I had the kids while going to school and while he was deployed. So, he was like it's your turn, you go to school, get your stuff and then after two years we'll both graduate the same summer.

LC (speaking about her husband): Oh my gosh, he is so supportive. He thinks it's amazing [that she is going to college again]. Like when I have tests and home work, he watches our daughter, so I can get that stuff done.

NT (speaking about his wife): She's also doing college online through the University of Phoenix to become a teacher... It helps to understand you know when we say, I need to go take a couple of hours to go to school. It helps us to understand that.

PVL (speaking about her husband): [He's] very supportive. I couldn't do it if he wasn't supportive... My husband is huge in helping me with stress, helping me relieve some things, cleaning the house, like little things like tasks that I need to do, and he does it for me like shopping like when I'm studying.

SW: I have probably the most supportive husband in the world who on top of working all day long, takes it upon himself to get our child ready in the

morning so I can be on campus if I need to. He fixes dinner, if he sees laundry or cleaning that needs to be done he just does it, so I can focus and get through school... There's no way I could do it without him. He's my pusher a little bit. He knows it's what I want so he does whatever he can to make sure that I achieve this dream and goal.

Of the 22 participants, only two identified circumstances where people in their lives were not supportive. When AD told his partner Nick about enrolling in college, his response was: "I'm scared that you're going to get all educated and leave me." His partner has not been supportive on the home front. Here's what AD had to say:

With Nick the problem I have is he doesn't do anything, but also he's at home, one job. Basically, me I have 2 jobs maybe 3 jobs when I count student government and he has to take up some of the slack. That's the biggest anxiety. It's just that he's not. So, I come home, I have to juggle that [home chores] and I have to come to school and I have to take naps in between classes.

LC's husband is supportive, however her mother is not and doesn't understand why she has decided to attend college again:

Like my mother, when I told her I was going back to school, it was really hard for her to understand why I would do that and I think her words were "the older you get the more unmarketable you are"... It's really hard for her [to understand LC's returning to school] and really scary. And that's something that's hard for me to understand and I have a hard time relating to.

Fortunately, both these participants have other sources of support to help minimize the impact. AD has support through his role in student government and LC has both a supportive spouse and support through study groups on campus.

Now that the key themes that emerged through the lens Schlossberg's Transition Theory have been identified, I further analyzed the participant interviews using

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to see if any additional insights or new information can be detected.

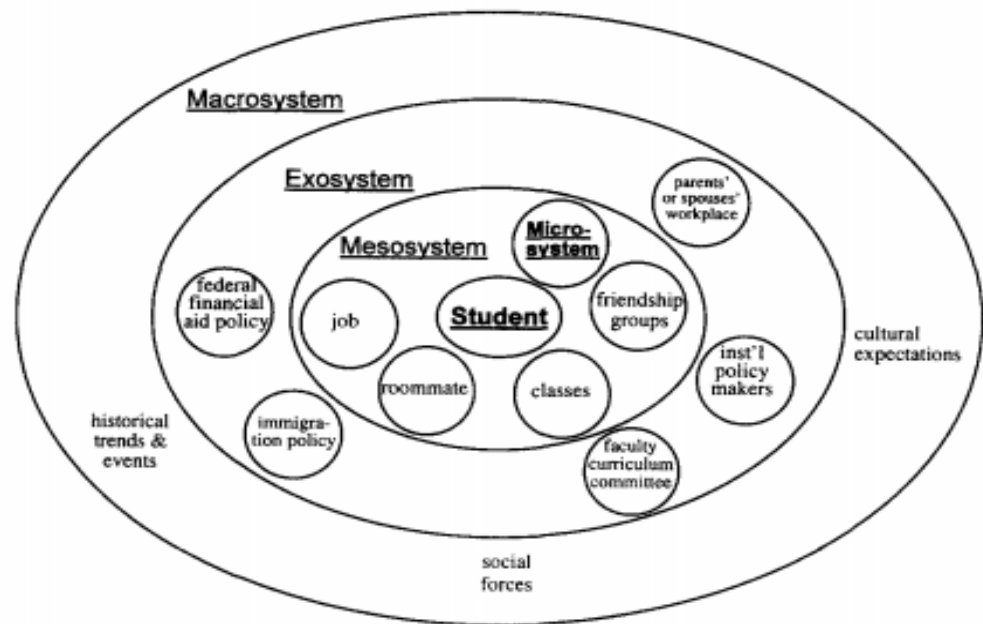
Data Analysis Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

In the hopes of gaining additional insights and understanding of all the factors that influence the transition college, I conducted another level analysis through lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. Bronfenbrenner proposes that to fully understand a situation, one must consider the process of how the "developmentally instigative characteristics" of the individual interact with and influence the various environmental systems (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four systems that constantly interact with each other and must be navigated by the individual:

- *Microsystems* which refers to the activities and relationships an individual interacts with on a day to day basis such as family, school, community, peers, church, work.
- *Mesosystems* is defined as the interactions between the microsystems a person experiences on a daily basis.
- *Exosystems* are systems external to an individual that influence their microsystem and over which the individual has no control including government agencies, media, extended family and the educational system.
- *Macrosystems* consist of the greater cultural and societal structures that influence the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem. These systems interact with one another and influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner (1979) identifies a fifth system under the component of “time” which has been referred to as the “Chronosystem” and represents the socio-historical context and environmental events and transitions that occur for the individual and within which the various systems operate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Below is Bronfenbrenner’s Model adapted for college students by Renn and Arnold (2003).

Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner’s model adapted for college students,



Source: Renn, K.A., & Arnold, K.D.. (2003). Reconceptualizing research on college student peer culture. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74 (3), p. 268.

In this section, I explored the findings by considering these systems as well as characteristics of the self in terms of how they relate to the research questions along with

demonstrating how aspects of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Gender Schema Theory integrate into Ecological Theory.

Personal Experiences and the Transition to College (Microsystems)

Subquestion one seeks to explore how nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college. To find answers to this question in the context of Ecological theory, I first explored the data in terms of the microsystems which emerged from the initial analysis of the data and includes their families, friends, jobs, community and aspects of the college itself.

Family Microsystem. Not surprising, I found significant themes regarding the role of family and how it effects the transition to college. To begin with, participants frequently spoke of how important family members were in terms of both emotional and practical support. This directly relates to the themes identified under the 'support' aspect Schlossberg's 4 S System (Goodman, et al., 2006) as well as Schlossberg's aspects of self in that these participants were willing to ask for and accept support which in turn directly relates to Bronfenbrenner's developmentally instigative characteristics of the self. Here are examples of the kinds of support participants disclosed:

KW (husband lives in another state and is caring for their children): In between the military and having kids he got deployed a couple of times and so I had the kids while going to school and while he was deployed. So, he was like it's your turn, you go to school, get your stuff and then after two years we'll both graduate the same summer.

LC (speaking about her husband): Oh my gosh, he is so supportive. He thinks it's amazing [that she is going to college again]. Like when I have tests and home work, he watches our daughter, so I can get that stuff done.

NT (speaking about his wife): She's also doing college online through the University of Phoenix to become a teacher... It helps to understand you know when we say, I need to go take a couple of hours to go to school. It helps us to understand that.

PVL(speaking about her husband): [He's] very supportive. I couldn't do it if he wasn't supportive...My husband is huge in helping me with stress, helping me relieve some things, cleaning the house, like little things like tasks that I need to do and he does it for me like shopping like when I'm studying.

SW: I have probably the most supportive husband in the world who on top of working all day long, takes it upon himself to get our child ready in the morning so I can be on campus if I need to. He fixes dinner, if he sees laundry or cleaning that needs to be done he just does it so I can focus and get through school... There's no way I could do it without him. He's my pusher a little bit. He knows it's what I want so he does whatever he can to make sure that I achieve this dream and goal.

SA: So how am I dealing with my stress. I call my mama. I mean she's been the most helpful.

Some family members provide practical support through helping with housing.

KW was able to live for free with a stepsister and brother-in-law in Great falls. JV moved in with his parents to save on housing costs so he would only need to work part time and could pursue his education. PW lived with her boyfriend who also provided financial support since she was unemployed. NT rents a home at an affordable cost from his in-laws.

NT: ...we rent from her parents. They have big acreage that has a house on it, so just for the cheap rent and cheap living. We figure it's easier to live there and drive down to school.

A majority of participants experienced support from their families, however two participants had family members who were not supportive. When AD told his partner Nick that he was enrolling in college, his response was: "I'm scared that you're going to

get all educated and leave me.” As previously discussed, his partner has not been supportive on the home front, but his situation is the exception with this group of participants. LC’s husband is supportive; however, her mother is not and doesn’t understand why she has decided to attend college again. Because her husband is supportive on an emotional and practical level, she is able to overlook her mother’s negativity.

Particularly when family members are not supportive, how the individual responds, reflected in aspects of the self, becomes critical. Although LC was bothered by her mother’s attitude, she did not let it deter her and the fact that her husband was both practically and emotionally supportive, helped minimize her mother’s negative attitude. In addition, LC was very determined and goal oriented and wants to set a good example for her child. Similarly, AD has the support of his mother and also sought support on campus by joining Student Government at the invitation of an old high school friend. During the Schlossberg analysis of the psychological resources of participants, both LC and AD demonstrated high levels of psychological resources in their ego strength, commitment and resilience which gave them the ability overcome the lack of support by key people. According to Bronfenbrenner, these are examples of individuals’ directive beliefs that they have control over their success.

The previous analysis using Schlossberg’s Theory further demonstrated that family often provides motivation to persist with college. Here are examples:

KW: I’m here for my family so we don’t have to live paycheck to paycheck or we can go fund things and not worry about stuff so.

SA (has a 3-year old daughter): I want to lead by example.

SW: My drive is a lot more intense to make sure I do and do it right the first time, so I don't have to spend twice the time away from those that I care about. My family, they've given up so much, so I can chase my dream and achieve my goals...so that's my drive to push through and finish strong.

WH: I want my son to be proud of who I am.

LC: I want my baby to know her mom could do it. Either way her mom could do it. I want my baby to know that if she works hard she can have things. I want her to see that education is important and that her mom and dad are a family and we support each other.

When LC was talking about what kept her going with school even after her mom came to live with them, she said, "I think maybe some of it is my husband is so supportive and I've mentioned that it's empowering and very stressful at the same time how encouraging he is about me going to school."

Family members can also have an impact on the college transition because of events that occur in their lives, that in turn create a change or challenge for the student. At her first interview, KW had her childcare worked out. Her husband and brother-in-law were caring for her children while she attended school. However, at her second interview she reported that her brother-in-law might be getting a new job in another state which would require a change to the child-care arrangements. When she initially learned this, she began making a plan to have her children come live with her and recruited extended family in Montana to help her with childcare.

KW: I have my dad in Lewistown. I've kind of already talked to my dad and my older brother who lives in Billings. They're OK with helping me. Even like I don't want my dad to have a heart attack, he's 62 or 63 and he said if he wants me to, I could just go home on the weekend and he would take care of the kids during the week which would be awesome, but I don't want him to die on me either. And then there's my older brother who just got married and he has a stepson, but he also said at the beginning if

Sean's [her husband's] brother didn't want to help us or if my husband couldn't handle it by himself, he would help out and take the kids and I would obviously go to Billings every weekend as much as I possibly could to see them.

The situation had resolved itself by our third interview, with the new plan being that the children would move to Montana. Here's how KW eventually resolved the situation:

KW: ...in July they'll [the children] will move here permanently... So I filled out paperwork for the daycare that's combined with the school and paid the dues and they're good for August 20, so I have that. I signed a lease for the duplex. Between work and school, I've been slowly moving stuff over there, but I haven't actually stayed there.

This is a good example of how the extended family system can be mobilized to support a student during their enrollment and how her resilience and problem-solving abilities helped her figure out a solution to a challenging situation.

Too often, unexpected family events created circumstances that could potentially imperil the participants' ability to continue their education. A prime example is LC's case. LC is married, has a 3-year-old daughter, works 40 hours a week and decided to enroll in college part-time. She was able to manage these competing demands, but near the end of the fall semester her mother was visiting and fell and broke both her hand and knee. As a result, her mother ended up staying with her and LC added the role of caretaker to her busy life. LC said:

So, I don't know how this semester is going to go because that is a lot of extra added into the mix. She broke her left hand and her right knee, so she's not able to drive, she's not able to shower by herself, so she needs taking care of. So, since November 25, I've been doing that balancing act as well. So, I don't know. I'm actually very nervous about this semester because with work and I'm taking 2 classes again... I'm nervous about how I am going to balance it all.

By her third interview midway into the Spring semester, LC's mother was recovering, but still living with them and LC was unsure whether she would be able to live on her own again. However, LC was still enrolled and planned to persist with her education which illustrates both her determination and strong coping abilities in the face of a challenging family situation.

Three other students were also impacted by a family member's illness. AD's grandmother had a heart attack and needed 5 stents. AD said:

AD: She's been in and out [of the hospital], she's had bleeding, she's on oxygen. So my cousin from Billings who is a nurse is basically living at my parent's house and that's so much stress on her and on my mom, so I'm trying to take some of that stress on. So that's been going on. So, for a few weeks actually we rotated hours.

SH's who works fulltime and is taking classes online had to travel to Arizona unexpectedly because her mother was having health issues. She said, "My mom was having health issues and I had to go down to Arizona ... She's 83 years old and I had to get some stuff straightened out for her. She lives by herself."

SA's grandmother had to be hospitalized. He said:

I think my GPA is OK, but on one occasion my grandmother went to the hospital and I went and picked her up from the hospital. That week was a crazy, crazy week and my routine got all off, and I ended up getting a 75 on a homework assignment.

As, with LC, these other three participants demonstrated resilience, perseverance and good coping skills to manage the additional stress in their lives.

In two other cases, unexpected family events resulted in participants withdrawing from school. Based on what limited information I could attain, IB reportedly stopped attending classes because of illness in his family, however I could not verify this because

he did not respond to my request for a follow-up interview. For participant, NT, his wife having a miscarriage was a catalyst for him withdrawing from school and re-evaluating career options. He said,

My wife and I, we had a miscarriage and so between that and the stress of everything, I had to be on depression pills and I've been having a lot of trouble keeping up with A&P 2 and between my wife having the surgery and stuff, it was very difficult keeping up and trying to keep up my grades and stuff, so I started looking at other options.

Thus, when unexpected health events occur within the family system, they impact students in a multitude of ways. As illustrated by the above examples, some individuals simply grit their teeth and persist, for others it can alter their college plans.

When a family member needs to relocate for any reason, particularly if it is a spouse or a partner, this directly impacts the student and their education. Since graduating from high school, PW had taken classes at several different campuses during various periods in her life. After attending just one semester at GFCMSU, her boyfriend with whom she lived and who supported her, accepted a new job in Spokane which meant that PW again had to look at enrolling at a different campus. She was not happy with GFCMSU because she had to withdraw due to a hospitalization near the end of the fall semester and was upset because the instructor would not grant her an incomplete. We connected by email near the end of the Spring semester and she informed me that she was still enrolled in GFCMSU and was taking two classes online. Since her goal was to get into a nursing program, she will at some point either need to move back to Great Falls or apply to local colleges in Spokane.

JV informed me during his second interview that he was moving to San Diego to live with his fiancé and thus would need to transfer to a college there. JA had been living with his brother in Great Falls, but decided to move back to Texas so he could live nearer to his mother. PVL's husband is in the Air Force, thus she began taking classes in Florida, took a break when he was transferred to Montana and finds herself wondering how much of her education she will be able to complete here before having to move again. She said:

The only thing is the military. If he's having to move in 2 years, maybe 2 ½ year, I'll be kind of in the middle of my BSN. I'm kinda like ugh. What will I do. So, I'm like just think about tomorrow and I can't think ahead. It's like we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Work Microsystem. Since 14 of the participants worked either full or part-time during the course of this study, it is important to consider their jobs as one of the microsystems impacting their transition. A theme that continually emerged was how supportive their employers were and how they were willing to work with them in a variety of ways. This is not always the case. Although I did not encounter it in this study, I have had students tell me that they would not be unable to attend class because they had been either called into or scheduled to work despite their employer knowing that they were expected to be in class during that time. The participants in this study had more positive things to say and often set clear expectations with their employers right from the start.

AD: Work is fine, I'm there and I'm gone, and they know that. I told my boss that. I said, listen this is not my goal in life. I will for work for you and work good but school will always come first before anything whether

you like it or not. So, I had to put that out there. So, I don't care if there is a meeting at 1:45 in the afternoon because I'm in class.

KW: I was working full weekends and I'm still doing that and the first three weeks of the semester I was also working Wednesdays because we get out at 12:30 and just those couple hours made a difference. I'm glad that Walmart is super nice about my not working Wednesdays because I kinda need the week to do homework and study for tests. I'm glad that they're willing to do that and that I'm not going to be there after the summer and like Walmart is not going to be my lifetime career. I'm just here to work, do a good job and get a paycheck until then.

NT: Right now, I work part time as a fitness specialist with Ponderay medical Center. I work in the evenings from 4:00 – 8:00P. I have a little bit of a schedule shift on Wednesday's to accommodate for doing lab for A&P, so I make up that extra hour on Friday... I do have the opportunity at work to do school because right now I'm doing A&P and my managers basically consider that to be on the job training and so they're OK with me doing A&P and PTA homework online and using my work computer and my work time to do that as long as my other work gets done.

TT (works at Target): I only work weekends and I coordinate with HR and let them know that I've got guard drill this time or I've got airline tickets this time. They're very flexible with me and with me being a student. They're perfectly fine. Like my manager was like if you need to take a couple of weeks off for school, I completely understand.

In considering aspects of the self, these individuals all demonstrated strong self-efficacy and were clear in stating their needs and priorities to their employers, making the situation work for them.

LC (in response to being asked if her company works around her class schedule): They do. I work 4 tens at my job, they don't know that I'm going back to school for anything [specific], they just know that I'm taking classes. So, I asked if I could just make up my hours on Fridays and they didn't have a problem with that.

PVL: I'm working right now 35-40 hours a week. The main thing is I have night shifts. I'll pull like the 12 to 7am or 3:30 to midnight shifts. So, it's not like your average 7 to 5 job. So, it's pretty rough, so my sleep pattern has to get adjusted... I can study, but when I pull my all-nighters, you can't study anatomy at 2 o'clock in the morning when you're already half

asleep. I talked to my boss and she now understands that my school is coming first, so she's been putting me on more of the earlier shifts so I'm able to focus...It was those midnight to 7am and then trying to go back to sleep in the morning, but I have a test, so in my head I can't go back to sleep. It was rough.

Besides being flexible with work schedules, SH identified another way employers can be supportive of education and that is through tuition reimbursement programs which her company offers. She said: "Quite honestly Centene has a wonderful reimbursement program for tuition, but if I had to take out student loans to do it, I would probably not do it because it's really not necessary." Although none of the other participants mentioned this benefit, it needs to be considered as a way in which employers can positively influence educational attainment.

SH also provides an example of another way work can influence school in that she received a promotion shortly after signing up for class. She explained:

And then right after I signed up for classes, I got a huge promotion at work and that's a lot more intensive. Before that it was a 40 hour week, no big deal. I would do my thing and I would come home. I knew my job like the back of my hand. Like right before I signed up, I got this very nice huge promotion and I went to corporate level. A lot more time, a lot more stress involved... 12 credits was just too much with my fulltime job. I work between 50 and 60 hours a week now and trying to do that [schoolwork] on top of that was just too much for me to handle.

SH demonstrated strong coping skills in that the promotion did not result in her withdrawing from school, rather she simply reduced the number of credits she was taking to make her coursework manageable.

Community Microsystem. Themes related to the community emerged and for purposes of this study, the fact that the community is relatively small is pertinent.

Participants spoke of encountering people on campus who they knew from high school or other community organizations and these connections played a positive role in their transition. Such connections would be less likely to occur in larger urban areas. Here are examples of how these connections helped:

JHM (speaking about initial struggles with his biology class): What helped me out there's actually a kid in my sociology class who I went to High School with and he's like "Oh I took that last semester, he's like, it's really easy. I actually liked lab better than I liked lecture. She gives you that one piece of paper that's on the internet that says lab list. As long as you know every word on it, you're good, he said there's no surprises, as long as you know everything on that list you're good." And I took that to heart and luckily, I had like the weekend to learn everything and I was able to pass my first exam.

AD: So currently I go to school with 8 other students that I graduated High School with and they are starting all over again. So, then my friend Tiffany who like graduated two years behind me, she's like the head chair [of student government]. We're like woohoo, it's so fun to have that. I have a co-worker I work with at Town Pump who goes to this school.

WH: I also see a couple people from the AA community, also one of them is a professor and the other one is a student so it just makes it more comfortable.

IB who had dropped out of high school because he had to go to work and support himself spoke of how his high school reached out to him eight years after he had left school and encouraged him to get his GED. Once he accomplished this, they helped him realize that he now had the option to go to college. He said:

IB: And then my former high school, because I went to Paris Gibson alternative school. I was really grateful because they actually got a hold of me... and I don't know they kind of wanted to use me as an example, kinda like saying if this 24, 25-year-old guy can go back [to school], you can too. I was fortunate enough where they helped me get my actual diploma at age 24, 25... And then like I said, that was the start of a very small snowball for me going back to school.

While growing up and living in a small community can make it easier to reconnect with people, it also presents challenges. On another level within the exosystem, Montana is a geographically large state with a small population and campuses are generally located in the larger cities which means that people from the more rural communities end up either commuting or relocating. NT regularly made a one-hour commute from his hometown to attend school. RE commuted daily from another town which is about 45 minutes away from Great Falls. TK would make an over two-hour commute to her home near the Canadian border every weekend. Eventually she decided to relocate to Great Falls. During the warmer weather, such commutes present less of an issue, but during the winter months they can be problematic. Here's what NT said:

On a personal level, it's just the drive getting down there [Great Falls]. This winter I had to miss two days in class just due to weather. But I let my professors know that I was probably not going to be able to make it in and they were all very understanding.

Particularly for those individuals who lived in other parts of the state and either were enrolled in the dental hygiene program or planning to enroll in it, attending GFCMSU required they either relocate to Great Falls or commute. EE's family remained in Helena and she commuted home on weekends to see them. SW's family relocated from Missoula to Great Falls so she could attend GFCMSU with the goal of applying to the dental hygiene program. JHF moved from Bozeman to Great Falls and KW left her family in Washington and took up residence in Great Falls after being accepted in the dental hygiene program. Both commuting or relocating create additional transitions beyond becoming a student, including leaving friends and family behind and adjusting to living in a new community.

Communities also vary in terms of the resources they offer. For nontraditional students, access to safe and affordable childcare is essential if they are to complete their education. GFCMSU recognized this need and six years ago, the student government helped fund the building of the Bright Beginnings Child Development Center located next to the campus. The Center provides childcare for children ages six weeks to six years of age. The center is managed by Bright Horizons Family Solutions. According to their website, “Bright Horizons Family Solutions® is a leading provider of early education and preschools, employer-sponsored child care, back-up care, educational advisory services and other work/life solutions.” Bright Horizons is a for-profit corporation thus, in addition to serving GFCMSU students, the center enrolls children from members of the community. Students, however, are eligible to receive from \$250-\$500 per semester to help defray the cost of enrolling their children (Bright Beginnings, n.d.). Eight of the participants had children within the age range served by Bright Beginnings, and at the time of the interviews, none of the students utilized this center for their childcare. SA’s daughter had been enrolled in the facility, but he was not happy with the care she received, so when his wife was laid off, he took her out of the center since his wife could now provide childcare. SW had looked into the facility and had this to say:

If there was a way to make daycare drop in price, that would make a huge difference. I take my daughter to an in home that is surprisingly significantly cheaper than Bright Beginnings. Not that I went just for cost but lucked out with an incredible daycare with a provider who has costs well under anywhere else I could find.

Two other participants needed to rely on daycare centers in the community, however their children had been enrolled in these facilities prior to their enrollment and the issue of

Bright Beginnings and cost was not mentioned as a concern. KC who was anticipating taking over the childcare responsibilities from her husband was planning to use Bright Beginnings beginning in the fall of 2018. She did not express concern about cost and simply said, “So I filled out the paper work for the daycare that’s combined with school and paid the dues and they’re good for August 20.” Thus, in considering daycare as part of the microsystem, cost, access and hours of operation and age of children accepted all have potential to impact the student.

Since several students brought up mental health and medical issues community resources to address those need to be considered. AD, PW and PK all had health issues and based on what they shared they did not run into issues getting treatment. AD, PW, JHF, KW and NT spoke of issues with depression, anxiety and ADHD. KW received treatment through the VA and NT did not disclose seeking treatment when he became depressed following his wife’s miscarriage. AD received treatment for mental health issues from his primary care physician and was already established with a counselor in the community. PW was provided with a referral to counseling by the disabilities services director. Since the campus is small, we do not provide onsite mental health counseling, however the school has been able to contract with the Great Falls Mental Health Triage Team for services. The team is a loosely organized group of local psychotherapists who have agreed to see students within 48 hours of being contacted and PW was able to be seen by a therapist from this team. GFCMSU will pay a set fee for the first three sessions. JHF brought up increased anxiety during her interview with me and I provided her with

the contact information for the Triage Team since she was interested in seeking treatment.

In addition to counseling, mental health disorders are frequently treated with medication as well and this is where resources are limited in Great Falls as there is only one psychiatrist in private practice and the remaining four work for the hospital or local agencies. Thus, being able to ensure that students' mental health needs are adequately met can be challenging. If they are unmet, this can make it difficult to persist in school.

The other microsystem that can play a role in students' adjustments is church and/or other community groups. Church membership per se did not emerge as a theme, however spirituality did. Particularly RE, JVL and WH talked about the role of spirituality in helping them cope and WH credited his membership in AA as key reason for his sobriety which is critical to his success as a student

These various microsystems create the mesosystems or linkages that can impact the transition to college (Evans, et al., 2010). From the themes that emerged during the initial analysis, it is evident that the immediate family, jobs and the size of the community have the greatest influence in participants' transition to college.

Developmentally instigative characteristics of the individual are especially critical in successfully negotiating the competing demands of the school/family mesosystem and school/job mesosystem. Being assertive and setting expectations for family member or employers can make all the difference in the ability to balance the role of student with their other roles. Examples include JVL telling her husband he would need to do more household chores, SW asking her family to basically delay spending quality time with her

until the summer or winter break, or AD telling his employer that school comes first, and EE saying no social engagements with friends. Individuals who do not have the capacity to be assertive in this manner might have difficulty prioritizing schoolwork because of their obligations to either family or employers. Research has shown that being able to effectively negotiate multiple microsystems is critical to nontraditional students' success in college (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Reay, 2003; Renn & Reason, 2013; Schuldt, 2011).

Exosystem

In considering the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's theory, themes that emerged related mainly to government policies and agencies and institutional policy and practices.

Veteran's Administration Policies. For the students who are current military or veterans, VA policies related to their GI benefits play a significant role. TT had this to say:

One thing I was really soured up was because I thought the GI Bill was going to cover 100% because I had six years of service. Little did I know that when I was in college the first time, I was on a ROTC scholarship, so the Air Force was already paying for my books and tuition. The fine print said if you were on scholarship while in college you have to serve four years before the GI bill clock starts ticking. Me serving just over 6 years and you need a minimum of 3 years of service for 100% of benefits. If I knew that I would have held on to do one more year of active duty because that only gives me 80% of tuition paid. So now I actually have to finance and pay off that 20% that I've been on hold for all semester. But it's also 20% of that monthly stipend, so \$1,100 now is \$780 which is a couple of hundred dollars difference. I can always apply for the Montana National Guard Scholarship which is like \$1300 a year or a semester to kind of make up the difference.

Receiving GI Bill benefits that pay for all or most of schooling can be a deciding factor influencing veterans to attend college and can also serve as a motivator to stay in school and do well. JA had this to say:

I'm taking 12 credits so I'm considered full time to get all of my GI Bill benefits and its going good. I was struggling at first but now I'm doing a lot better. I wasn't treating it as a big priority which I should have. I don't know if it's because the military is paying for it and it seems like I have "nothing to lose" if I don't get a good grade or pass, but after reading some stuff and finding out that if I slack and fail they can ask for my BAH [Basic Allowance for Housing] money back, so now I'm making sure I do all of my assignments and don't miss any classes.

JV also recognized how important the GI Bill was:

The fact that the government is kind enough to pay for it [college] is a godsend because, well if I work for Walmart and can't pay for a place to live, there is no way I could pay for school. That was probably the biggest hurdle to overcome and the VA allows me to do that.

KW mentioned how the regulations regarding getting GI Bill benefits has influenced the number of credits she has taken each semester making it more difficult to juggle her multiple roles.

...I needed to take a full load because for my military benefits I have to have 12 credit hours and then I was just in awe of how much I had to do. I had to take care of my kids. At least my husband was home at that time, but before we moved to Washington at the beginning of that summer he left again.

As mentioned in her quote, KW's husband is still in the Navy, so her husband's deployments have impacted her studies at various times during her education. Although she was the only one to mention this, any students who are active duty military, reserve, or national guard, can have their educational plans disrupted by being called for duty, deployed or transferred to another duty station. Policy decisions that guide these, come

from the Federal Government level through the Department of Defense and in the case of the National Guard, from the state level. As mentioned by KW, being deployed or called for duty can have unintended consequences for the spouses who are students due to the absence of their partner's practical and emotional support. Thus, policy decisions at federal and state levels and how these impact service members and their families is an exosystem that can have a tremendous impact on student success and persistence.

Federal Financial Aid Policies. Just as GI Bill benefits have an impact on students, federal financial aid policies also influence students who depend on financial aid to pay for their education. It is important to remember that 71% of the students at GFCMSU rely on financial aid (Report to the Community, 2014-2015), so it is unlikely that most of the participants could afford to pay the tuition out of pocket. Here is what participants said about various forms of financial aid:

NT: Luckily FAFSA covered a fair amount [of tuition] for me, but I think by the time I graduate I'm going to owe about \$13,000 and my wife is going to owe another \$70,000 on top of what I have.

PW: I did get a Pell Grant and the rest is just a little bit of savings that I have.

PK: I was going to take a writing class, but I got sick and she didn't allow more than two sick days. And I tried, and it messed up my financial aid and everything like I said, that's why I'm kind of hurting right now... Usually I would take the loans, but I'm totally out the door for loans because you have to take 6 credits at least.

Also from PK: I'm getting help through voc-rehab and then I've applied for some of the student loans and grant money. So those are some of the resources I'm using.

The theme that consistently emerged related to financial aid was simply needing to complete the forms to apply. That is where the college admissions staff plays a crucial role in helping students navigate the process. No significant challenges were brought up during the interviews and several mentioned completing the FAFSA forms without assistance.

SA: You know I was very prepared. I did find the staff helpful, but I did most of it on my own. I had my FAFSA filled out before I walked in these doors.

WH: I did my FAFSA in like September and then I did my college application and took my Accuplacer 30 days before the deadline, so it wasn't a rush...

JHM: Especially because you know I show up Monday and there was nobody in the enrollment office and I went back and forth between all these people to get everything done and Tuesday, I had to finish something for financial aid and when I was in oil, I had my own business so between the business taxes and the personal taxes they needed a verification for what I filled out on my FAFSA...

Federal and State Education Systems. Another agency that has an impact on the transition process is the U.S. Department of Education. The theme that emerged related to the mandate that colleges provide training to new students on substance abuse and sexual assault prevention. The nontraditional students participating in this study were not thrilled about needing to complete these mandatory trainings, but some viewed them as a necessary evil for being able to enroll:

MJ (who just wanted to enroll in one class for fun): I know this sounds funny, but I had to sit down and do that thing about alcohol in school. And honestly, I thought, this is funny, but for I'd say 1/3 of the students it's necessary.

PW: And then the thing that I just had to finish in order to re-enroll for the spring term that I thought was the stupidest thing. I get it, but I still think it's stupid, I had to do an alcohol education. At one point I was drawing designs in the anonymous survey and making things up and I had to take a special assault-harassment thing with I thought was totally funny,

SH: I have to keep remembering that there are some things that are part of the process like having to do the Alcohol Edu class and all that.

TT: I feel like the big thing that caught my attention and I was loath to do was the whole substance abuse and the whole rape thing, those computer-based trainings because we go through the same exact nonsense yearly with the military... To me it's shoved down my throat because of the military culture. To see it again, I was just like noooooooooo. So that was the worst thing.

It should be noted that other than the Federal and State Government policies have the potential to impact students even though no other themes related to this emerged. On a state level, decisions are made regarding the cost of tuition which in turn can be influenced by how much funding is received by the state from the Federal government. There are also federal and state work-study programs that help students finance their education. Any changes made regarding policies related to higher education at either the federal or state level have the potential to impact students.

GFCMSU Institutional Policies. Other components within the exosystem that have a tremendous impact on students would be GFCMSU institutional policies and procedures which in turn are influenced by decisions made by the Montana Board of Regents, the Montana University System and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) through which the campus receives its accreditation. Since one of the guiding research questions is "What

are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?” for the purposes of this study, I will focus mainly on GFCMSU as the institution, with the understanding that some of policies and procedures affecting students at an institutional level are mandated at the state and federal levels or by the accrediting body and it is the college’s job to simply implement these.

The major themes that emerged related to the admissions process, orientation, advising, the importance of the ASC, the COLS class, the availability and delivery format of classes, and the faculty. The first encounter a prospective student has is generally with the admissions office and for the most part, the comments from participants were positive. PVL had this to say about the staff when she enrolled:

Oh, they were amazing, because I went to school in south Florida and there it was just line up one after another. It was like take your ticket and go. There I was like just another person in the room and I felt like here everyone was very personable.

SA had this say about admissions:

You know I was very prepared. I did find the staff helpful, but I did most of it on my own. I had my FAFSA filled out before I walked in these doors... I did it pretty much on my own. I did a lot of research before I came... You know Victoria in financial aid, she’s a genius. If I had the right question, she had the right answer.

TK said, “Yeah I thought everybody was great.” TT said, “I talked to Julie Rummel, she’s the one who really pushed me in the direction of how to apply for it [GI benefits] and I’ve just been working with her all semester long about the situation.” And WH said:

The administration part of becoming a college student, I would have to say I was flabbergasted. I was amazed at how welcoming this facility was. With my background and everything I've had, in the moment I was self-conscious and lacked self-confidence because of my background, but these guys were just open doors, open arms, just willing to help me along with anything I needed.

Not all the participants had positive experiences with the admissions process. PW said:

I found it [getting enrolled] was kind of a pain in the ass truthfully. Because you did your application, you sent your transcripts, signed up for your classes and then you like had to send proof of you know vaccines and I'm like I don't know where I received my childhood vaccines.

SH said:

Financial aid was a joke. I was never so disappointed. First of all, she's on the phone talking to her credit card company about something on hold or this of that or whatever while I standing there waiting...So the lack of professionalism was terrible, absolutely terrible. Some of the attitudes were like well you should know this, like the registrar's side of it. Why should I know this?

Some of these differences in participants' experience with the admissions office may be attributed to Bronfenbrenner's concept that different individuals' illicit different types of responses from their environments based on how they approach a situation (Evans, et al., 2010).

Once students are enrolled, the Advising and Career Center plays a critical role in guiding the students in selecting their courses and getting registered for their classes.

Here is what the GFCMSU website has to say about the role of advisors:

Your **Advisor** is here to assist you with achieving educational goals through an interactive advising and educational partnership. With your advisor, you will develop a plan of study based on your prior academic preparation and objectives. You are encouraged to see your Advisor early in the semester to plan a course of study that will help meet your interests and goals. Contact your advisor more frequently when receiving an unsatisfactory grade report, you are unsure of your major, thinking of

changing your schedule, or you are experiencing difficulties that are interfering with your academic progress.

Some participants reported positive experiences with their advisors. Here are their comments:

IB (who wants to pursue a career in criminal justice): My advisor, she's really a nice gal. She was very informative because of particularly what I wanted to do and where I want to go. She had prior experience working at [University of] Providence, so she knew some more insight than I knew when it came as far as all my classes were scheduled, like the main course I want to go for. They have the print out of classes you need for that course and we picked directly from those classes that will go from here directly to there and not need to have a few extra credits that won't count. She was very helpful with that.

JA: They [the Advising Center] helped me a lot to organize my schedule. They helped me a lot to organize my studies, what to put in my studies, what electives I have to take.

NT: I had Greg Stivers as my student advisor and he was really helpful in setting me up with my class schedules and stuff like that and my course schedule. I met with him probably 3 or 4 times in the first month to get everything all squared away and figure out what's going to be the best course of action. He was very easy to talk to, very easy to get along with.

PW: Also what I did like here, I got sick with a sinus infection and I missed some classes and the instructor reached out to my advisor and my advisor actually called me and that's the first time that's ever happened. It's amazing. That doesn't normally happen. In really big schools you're just a number. And I felt like that was different at this school... I also think that having to meet with your advisor in order to register is helpful and they see how things are going and you can ask any questions. That's really helpful.

PVL: Even my advisor who I go to for the nursing is very good about making sure I'm in the right class. He explains things to me. I was taking a wrong class two years ago [at another campus] and I never even knew it. He explained that to me.

PK: I'm using my advisor if I need help, especially with making sure I register right... And she's been helpful... As far as taking classes, I still need help from an advisor. We decided that I'm going to go into an associate of arts because pretty much everything that I did before, hardly

any of it transferred because most of it is way too old. Because it's been more than 10 years.

SW: The advisor I had to begin with was incredible, I was so sad when she left. It crushed my heart because she was just so on the ball and because I wanted to get all my prereq's done between two semesters. When I told her I was working and a parent, she just said no, you need to focus and be realistic, which I'm not a very realistic person at times and I have grand ambitions. And that made a huge difference for me, because I didn't get overloaded right at the beginning.

TK: And we needed to meet with our advisor and the coach to find out what their jobs are. I knew what an advisor was, but I went and met with the new advisor that took Greg's place and she's a coach. So, I still don't quite know what a coach does.

WH: I mean I've been there [Advising Center] 2 or 3 times. So, but it's been, it's a great experience the couple times I have been in with my advisor.

Some of the other participants' comments about the advising center were somewhat mixed or even negative.

AD: My advisor is new, she'd been there two weeks. So, I was patient and didn't want to bombard her with a lot of crazy questions. Because I needed an intro to computers class, I did computers and I needed to test out of it and she couldn't figure that out. So, I was like let's just move that sheet over here. No big deal. Lucky for her I had already seen Troy before I met with her and he had already made an educational plan of what I was going to be doing these semesters. I like her, I can walk in and talk to her.

BB: I really would love it if you could choose your advisor because I felt like I was given bad advice which is, I felt like, don't get me wrong, because I know this college has an ASN program and I feel like they really push that because it's part of their curriculum, but in the long run you look at national trends. So, they're doing like the BSN in 10 which is in New York, where you have to have your BSN within 10 years. That's a trend across the nation. I think that not informing people about that is really doing a disservice. Or at least if they're really going to push the ASN, also offer a bridge program at the school.

LC: I think maybe the most confusing part was just initially coming back to school. I would really like to find an advisor or someone. I mean I have

someone right now because obviously you need that to get your pin to register, but I think I'd really like someone who can sit down with me and really dig into a career, not just steps to getting a career but the actual career. I think if I had that the first go around it would have altered my path.

PW (who initially reported a positive experience with advising) I was very frustrated when I went to my advisor and I was informed his wife had cancer and so he was missing work... So I went to another advisor, who was the head of the advising department and asked if I can get an incomplete and come back. And he's like incompletes aren't really given, they're really rare. So I went to my instructor and told her that I was told by the advisor that I have to work it out directly with the instructor. And the instructor said, well I don't know. For lab classes you have to go to the head of the division.

RE: It's interesting the advisors. I think for older students they need to beef up on some of the stuff. Because I think that sometimes they assume we know something. They assume that you go here and you get your information and stuff. Sometimes an elderly guy likes to be led a little bit because he's trying to make decisions that are different from when you went to college before.

SH: I'm really a one on one person... I wanted to sign up for next semester and I said I want to come in and talk to you. And she's like we can do that over the phone or over email and I'm like, no, I really need to come talk to you...I have talked to actually two different advisors, one male and one female, both younger than myself and they were just not picking up on what I was putting down.

Another way that institutions influence how well nontraditional students transition to college is through orientation and in fact, the importance of orientation was identified under the "moving in" aspect of Schlossberg's theory (Goodman, et al, 2006). For orientation, students attend an Essential Start class either face to face or online. The class covers what it takes to be a successful student, helps them set up login credentials for campus systems, teaches them to navigate D2L and teaches them about financial aid. In addition, to this one-day

orientation session, every student must take COLS 103 Becoming a Successful Student, preferably during their first semester of enrollment. Here is a description of the course from the 2018-2019 Course Catalogue:

To graduate from Great Falls College MSU, every student is required to take [COLS 103](#), Becoming a Successful Student, or meet its equivalent. The course emphasizes strategies for academic and personal success, including academic and career planning, goal setting, and academic skill development in areas such as note-taking, study skills, test-taking strategies, and time management skills. Students are expected to enroll in this class during their first semester or prior to completing 16 semester credits.

Participants gave mixed reviews on the effectiveness of the Essential Start orientation and the COLS 103 class. Here are comments about orientation:

JHM: The orientation thing on line – I didn't gain much.

SA: Orientation class, I understand you could have taken that online. If I hadn't been face to face in that class I would have been hurting... I wish the orientation in that area [technology] would have been more. Someone who's been in a situation like me with no technological experience, I think I needed a couple of hours of one on one.

BB who was considered a returning student because he had been enrolled at the college 5 years earlier, was not given the option to attend orientation and said this:

If they had like the week before class started, just having like a day or even having like a Becoming a Successful Student which is fine, but even having like a 4 hour or 8 hour class where it's just like this is what you can expect and this is how things run now and you are going to need to show up already prepared for things because that was me. Oh cool, I've got a pen, I've got a notebook, here's my textbook and I'm ready. So OK turn to page 3 on your notes. I'm like what notes, I haven't written anything yet.

When I asked him what we as a campus could do better for nontraditional students, his response was "Re-orientation please." This is good example of where the college's policy of not providing orientation to students who return after a significant break in enrollment,

may leave students feeling less prepared. This is also more likely to affect nontraditional students since they are more likely to be returning students like BB.

Similarly, for participants who were taking the COLS 103 class, the reviews were mixed. Some found it very useful and had this to say:

SA: I'm taking this class, *Becoming a Successful Student* and it's given me some strategies and I'm using those...I would say it's [COLS class] more than useful, the information, the curriculum. I wish that it was worth a little more.

TA: That too [COLS 103] has been a great class. It introduced things that I didn't know were here.

IB: It's useful to a point, but it's only one credit... I got more homework in that class that I do in my other classes. Why is there so much homework?

WH (when asked if he found the class useful): In a way it is. Like the note taking part that they teach you about. That's where I learned about how to connect yourself with what you want to learn.

However, WH also said that it was challenging for him to focus in the COLS class: "I veer off a lot in my head." BB felt that the information provided in the class was useful, but the timing was not. He did not have to take it as a returning student, but had this to say about friend who was taking it:

So, I have a friend who is way older than me and she took that [COLS 103], but the problem is that you go through it, it's like well I needed this two weeks ago kind of thing. So, it's not preparing you.

AD raised an important point. When he was asked if he found the class useful, he said,

As an older adult no. It's my worst class right now because I'm focusing on other classes. I understand that it would be really good for first time younger students. We didn't have that when I first started. But as an adult who has already established their life, sitting there learning about how to plan your finances or eat healthy or you know time management, I was

like I do this every day as an adult already and now I have to sit here and listen to this.

When asked if there was a similar class but designed for nontraditional students would be useful, he had this to say:

Definitely – how to manage family, or you know more psychological. I know sometimes adult things can be very overwhelming especially if you have kids. I don't know how you would teach that, but it would basically be with a focus on how to balance your life, work, family. AD did say that he found the journals that were required in the class helpful “because taking whatever the anxiety or problem is from here to a piece of paper removes that anxiety.”

The challenge for GFCMSU may well be that Orientation and COLS 103 tend to be geared more towards traditional college students. Since almost half the student population is nontraditional, it is important to consider how such programs affect how well we prepare adult learners for their student role.

Once nontraditional students are enrolled and begin classes, some find themselves struggling either with technology or the course content and for the most part they seek resources and are frequent users of the Academic Success Center (ASC). According to the GFCMSU website here are the services offered by the ASC.

The Academic Success Center provides the help you need to successfully complete your coursework and eventually your program. Free tutoring is available to all Great Falls College MSU students, and no appointment is necessary.

Content specific tutoring is available in the following areas:

- Accounting
- Computers
- Graphic Design
- Math
- Music

- Psychology
- Science
- Writing

The Academic Success Center tutors are able to assist with various **study skills** to help you be a successful learner. Some of these skills include:

- Independent Computer Use
- Mind Mapping
- Note Taking
- Reading
- Test Preparation
- Time Management
- Using Study Aids

For feedback on your papers you can also **email us** at academicsuccess@gfcmu.edu. Please include:

- Your paper
- A copy of the assignment requirements

During the Spring 2018 semester, the hours of operation were Monday – Thursday from 9:00AM to 7:00PM, Friday from 12:00PM – 6:00PM and Sunday from 2:00PM to 8:00PM. In addition, the ASC implemented child friendly hours Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, from 5:00PM to 7:00PM when students could bring their children along while they received tutoring. None of the participants mentioned taking advantage of this option. To further make the tutoring services accessible, students don't need to come into the ASC, but can set up tutoring appointments via Google Hangouts. The ASC is constantly striving to support the mission of the college and ensure that students are successful in achieving their educational goals. A number of participants identified the importance of the ASC in aiding their transition to college:

AD: There were a few times I was in there just because I needed some place quieter to work. So, I would go work in there, but Brent [one of the writing tutors], I had him review my papers for Writing 101.

BB (when asked what helped him): Definitely getting plugged into the Academic Success Center for sure and also study groups.

JHM: I look at you guy's Academic Success Center. I kinda went in there a couple of times, pretty much just picking the guy's brains and stuff. I still don't know how I feel. I've never really gone and sat down and talked with anybody.

JA: I've used It sometimes.

JV: First semester, I used the ASC fleetingly, but I haven't used it this semester at all... but at the same time the ASC is a huge resource that I do not utilize enough, but I know it's there.

LC: But I have actually used the student center, the ASC. I love it. I would never have utilized it the first go around...But this time, I utilize that a lot and I go there to get help.

NT: I use the ASC quite a bit, especially for math.

PW: You know I have [used the ASC] a little bit for the models. I use it for the lab a little bit more, but I really think they ought to expand the hours. There's only two days a week when they're open after 6:00PM. I think they're open Sunday's now.

PK: There's the ASC and there's a couple of tutors in there that are really good and they help me out. They make it simple for me... I really like that place too because there are a lot of other older people in there and we've got commonalities and things like that.

RE: I spend 90% of my time in the resource room [ASC]. They helped me do things so I'm not scared of it... Like I go around and I know who teaches what and who does what. I made darn sure I knew who was the best at what I needed. I don't go to the ones that I think are arrogant or think they know everything. I just don't do it... And see an older person will not ask a younger person a lot of times so to make that accessible is one of the things that is important.

SA: I do [use the ASC]. It's one of those things where you have to know what questions to ask.

SW: Yeah, I use that [ASC], open lab, for the most part for my anatomy classes, but I have a good study group, so I can do open lab more so than the ASC, but I still spend a lot of time there, even when I'm not working in open lab, I'm there studying.

WH: Yes, every day I do [use the ASC], every day, right from the start. I told myself I needed to learn how to study, I needed to learn how to get my homework done on time. I want to be great and I want to do this right and the only to do this right is asking for help.

Regardless of whether or not they chose to use the services, all of the students interviewed were aware of the Academic Success Center and those who had not felt the need to use it, said that they would, should run into difficulties in any of their classes. Whether or not students choose to seek help in the ASC has to do with characteristics of the self. A good example of this is JHM, who set up and leads informal study groups rather than asking tutors to help him. He admitted feeling uncomfortable going in the ASC and questioned whether the credentials of the tutors were adequate.

The ASC is a prime example of how institutional services as part of the exosystem play an important role in nontraditional students' success. This quote from TK sums this up: "And the student study center[ASC] has been a big help too... Yeah I think I'm so lucky because all the tools are here and you just need to learn which ones to use."

A resource provided by every institution of higher learning is a library. Having access to books, journals and other forms or media is critical for students along with a knowledgeable library staff to assist them in finding what they need. As an instructor at GFCSU, I find the library an excellent resource, but one of my biggest challenges is getting students to use it. In interviewing participants, I found that their main use of the library was as a quiet place to study or to use computers and printers. Not one mentioned utilizing it as a resource when conducting research or completing homework. Here's what participants had to say when I asked if they used the library:

EE: I really like the library, but sometimes I feel way to close to the person next to me, but it's easy to shut down and focus.

JHM: I actually spend quite a bit of time in the library, probably 6-8 hours a week. I need the non-distraction. I can't be at home, I'll find other things to do.

JA: I used the library like once. I use more the ASC, but the library not really.

JV: I used it [the library] extensively for my online class last semester because they had computers there that I could use and it was, I noticed very brutally that I am easily distracted by anything and the library is very quiet. So, I go in there to study.

KW: Just their scanner to email some pages. I haven't gone in there for books.

LC: I have used the library a couple of times. It's a beautiful library, but a little bit of that is time. If I can do it from home, I will do it from home. I have to tell you, I just had an impromptu training on how to use library services online and that was amazingly helpful. I wish I could have had that at the beginning of the semester. And the library person Laura is nice and super helpful... And it's cool that you can access anything online.

PW (when asked if she uses the library): Not really, just to print.

PVL: No (note: she also did not know she could access it online).

SH: I haven't yet.

SW: Yeah, as far as resources, not so much, but I like the little quiet study rooms, especially if you have to bring your kid on campus with you. Because you can reserve a room and let them play and study and you're not gonna bother someone else because your kid is there.

TT: Just to print a few things. I feel like the library, while it's useful, I can find the same information from home or elsewhere on the internet. I feel that the internet is so advanced that libraries unfortunately are on a decline.

WH: I use the library to print some documents out. I haven't been in there too much.

It is interesting that institutions of higher learning are expected to have libraries, yet the challenge, at least on the GFCMSU campus, seems to be in getting students of all ages to understand what a valuable resource they are beyond a quiet study place or a place to print documents. I suspect this has to do with internet and search engines like Google that students of all ages are already familiar with.

Beyond the admissions process and special resources like the Advising and Career Center and the ASC, the faculty of an institution are an important part of the exosystem that have a tremendous influence over the students' microsystems. For example, what if a child gets sick, and a student misses an assignment, how supportive is faculty? How does faculty respond when a student is called into work and misses class? What if a student lives an hour outside of town and can't attend class because of bad road conditions? A theme that I consistently came across in this study, is that the participants found faculty to be supportive and a key part of their successful transition. Here's what participants' said:

IB: I would say the whole faculty of this school has been absolutely great. That's like another reason for me coming back to school. Just finding out how easy it was to get questions answered you know, not feeling like you're stupid kind of thing.

JA: Just I think pretty much having good teachers, very much good teachers that guide you, that tell you that, they kinda explain to you what is going on.

JV: I find that interacting with faculty is quite easy because I'm more the age of the faculty.

JHF: I'm pretty close in age to a lot of our instructors. I think there's one or two that are older, so I feel like in that sense I attach well with them. I understand why the program is the way it is and why it's so challenging. They really have our backs.

LC had numerous positive comments about her instructors:

McKeever was my biology teacher. She is special. I am telling you she is special and this college is lucky to have her. She really made it for me that first semester, letting me know that I was in the right place. (Speaking about her Chemistry instructor): ...every time I've reached out to him, he has been more than willing to meet me after class or wherever or even in the evenings, so I have no complaints... My daughter had a medical emergency at the beginning of the last semester and I was afraid that I would miss too much. Not a problem, and they [her instructors] were like nope, let us know what you need, let us know how we can work with you and it was like not big deal. What a relief that was to know that they were willing to work with me. It was amazing. The sociology class I had Angie Rolando and I thought it was going to be an easy cakewalk of a class and it turned out to be my hardest class. It was a really good class, she makes you think and for that, I thought, I think the university is lucky to have her.

NT: Professors were very attentive, very responsive. I never felt like I had to send a whole bunch of emails until I got a response, I could send an email and get a response back in a timely manner... On a personal level, it's just the drive getting down here. The past winter I had to miss two days in class just due to weather. But I let my professors know that I was probably not going to be able to make it in and they were all very understanding.

PW: I really like Dr Canine. She is an excellent instructor, she is wonderful, she wants students to learn, she'll work with them. She's a real person, it's just she's a great asset.

PVL: The teachers I have, they're awesome, like very good. I feel like they really care about the students... Even my A&P teacher before I left [dropped the class], she's the one who taught me about my visual learning style. It was Cherie McKeever, she's like the best teacher. I so wish I could have taken that class, but I felt like she really cared about her students. I felt like she really values teaching and learning and all that stuff.

PK: Every teacher I've worked with has been great. Especially if you go to them personally... I haven't had a situation yet, where I've needed to contact them and explained my situation, it seems like they're always willing to work with me.

SA: I think that my success so far has a lot to do with my teachers. I think I got really lucky because I didn't know any of the teachers.

SH: Those instructors online are fantastic.

SW: And the professors have been awesome, super helpful. I think they're really accommodating... I was really impressed with the way teachers care here. It makes a huge difference because I don't think I would have been as successful at a different college campus where you pay your money and if you go to class great, if don't go, that's great too because we don't really care. We have our money.

In contrast the only negative comment about faculty came from PW who had this to say: "I find it really lame that instructors don't really teach more. They rely on the book manufactures to do everything for them." Despite this she did praise her biology teacher and that quote has been included above

These quotes from participants illustrate that as nontraditional students, they appreciate faculty being responsive to their needs. From my own personal experience as a faculty member, I have had nontraditional students really stress when personal circumstances interfered with their ability to attend class or complete assignments by the due date. As illustrated in several of the quotes, nontraditional students are very appreciative when faculty understand their unique challenges and are willing to work with them. Faculty as part of institutional exosystem play an important role in helping nontraditional students' transition. However, it is important to recognize that faculty on the GFCMSU campus are able be responsive in this manner because the average class size is 17, with the largest class size being 30 students and the faculty to student ratio is 18:1 (Report to the Community, 2014-2015), which is not necessarily the case at larger colleges and universities.

Finally, the availability and delivery format of the classes whether face to face, online, or hybrid has a direct impact on students. At GFCMSU, 56% of classes are

offered face to face, 40% percent online and 4% are hybrid (Factbook, 2016). Oftentimes, nontraditional students who juggle multiple roles, prefer online classes for convenience, although this was not necessarily the case in this study. SH who has a fulltime management job at local corporation and frequently works 50-60 hours week, enrolled in online classes only because of the convenience and flexibility. She had this say about the experience:

I think I'm a very visual learner, so for me to go to a classroom and listen and I'm also dyslexic. So, for me to listen to an instructor and take notes, I retain a lot. So to transition to an all online program where I have to read a lot, which I love to read, but it's a whole different way of learning. So that was quite a challenge for me... I'm OK with it [online classes]. I miss the people contact.

SH also spoke of the way instructors set up online classes making a difference. She spoke of instructors setting up their classes in two-week modules which allowed her to work ahead which she liked. This was especially helpful when her mother health issues and she had to go Arizona unexpectedly. She said:

My mom was having health issues and I had to go down to Arizona and it all worked out really well. A lot of that was because of the module structure. I was able to work ahead in 3 classes and then I contacted the instructor in the other one and she released the work early so I could take care of it. I was down there a week and half and I didn't have to worry about school.

SH recognized that depending on the courses she wanted to take, at some point she would need to take face to face classes on campus and that only taking online classes limited her options. She said:

There were probably different areas that I could have gone to if it was a total classroom thing, I don't know yet because I haven't really had the experience. Like I said, I realize I'm going to have to look at some night classes and I don't know what is offered yet.

What's interesting is that of the participants who work fulltime, SH was the only one enrolled in strictly online classes. LC, who was enrolled part time was able to work with her employer to take time off during the day to attend face to face classes, "I work 4 tens at my job...so I asked if I could just make up my hours on Fridays and they didn't have a problem with that." She was going to take an online class her second semester and had this say, "I'm looking forward to having one online class. I think it will free me up, I think that will be the saving grace for me, is not having to be in class for two classes." LC was the participant whose elderly mother came to live with her after she was injured in a fall, so although she was initially reluctant about online classes, the change in her circumstances helped her see the advantage of having more flexibility to complete work without having to show up on campus at specific times. Interestingly, the remaining participants who worked full-time worked afternoon or overnight shifts that allowed them to attend face-to-face classes that took place during daytime hours.

In some instances, participants enrolled in online classes because that was the only delivery format offered for classes in their discipline. JV is a prime example. He is working on degree in computer technology and many of the classes are only offered online which he feels is not a good fit for him. JV said this,

Online class atmosphere does not appeal to me at all because I am a horrible self-motivator...There's no external motivation to do it other than the instructor saying you need to get this done when you take classes face to face, but it doesn't work as well online. I'm horrible at it... In the future I'm going to try and stay away from online classes as much as possible...With the online classes you don't have the benefit of demonstration and I learn more from seeing and hands on than from the books or even, I don't know why, even lectures stick in my mind more than books do.

SW also found she procrastinated more in her online classes and shared this experience:

My very first semester back, when I procrastinated so much with my math class, that was an online class. I learned the hard way. I had to retake the class because I didn't have an A in it... I think the only class I struggled with online as far as workload was College Writing, which was challenging.

AD who would be taking his first online class during the coming semester also had similar concerns as JV: "I don't want to do online because it doesn't hold me accountable, it's all on me. Like I'm not going to see someone face to face and have that look like, 'where have you been?'"

BB expressed his dislike of online classes:

It's not my thing. I'm taking my first – oh that's a lie because I did psychology online. But it's hard for me, like I need that [face to face contact] plus I'm an auditory learner anyway... I'm taking nutrition online this semester and I swear I'm going to have to find a buddy or something because it's just too much, it's way too much for me. It's a hard way for me to learn and I think a lot of returning nontraditional students prefer in class. Like I hate online classes.

RE was also not a big fan of online classes, but had to take Mathematics with Health Care Applications online because that was the only format it was offered in. He said, "I would never take another math class online." He spoke of liking to work ahead, but the way the course was structured, he could work ahead but not take the tests until the instructor released them and he found this frustrating.

In contrast PW had this to say about online classes:

Yes, I actually do really well in online classes I have no trouble staying disciplined. I mark my calendar when things are due and I can do it in my pajamas. And if I'm not feeling well, or if I'm having a flare up of my chronic illness, I can do it in little bits.

The other issue that arose was the availability of classes in the evening. Both LC and BB brought this up and BB had this to say about the matter:

There are like hardly any evening classes, for a school that, because there are a lot of nontraditional students, but gosh there are no evening classes. Like when I lived in Las Vegas and I was looking at going to a community college there and they had like basically a mirror of the morning in the evening, but here they don't have that which is very shocking to me. I think that more evening classes would help a lot.

It was interesting that only BB and SH raised this issue as so often working nontraditional students are only able to attend college in the evening or online.

Class size is also has a significant impact on learning and was mentioned, the average class size at GFCMSU is 17 students per class which is small. IB, PVL, PW all stated that they appreciated the smaller class size and learned better in such an environment.

Two years ago, in the fall of 2016, GFCMSU did a pilot project with block scheduling as a part of which a cohort of students moved through a set group of classes together. The campus has been continuing to explore the use of the cohort model and IB happened to be the only participant in the study who was part of such a cohort. He had this to say;

That [being part of a cohort] has made it very helpful. I'm very happy I started with the spring semester because from what people tell me if I started in the fall semester, my class would have been a lot bigger and that's what I'm very fortunate about because I think this semester is perfect for my transition to school because it doesn't just throw me into a huge class of people.

Decisions by the administration on such issues as block schedules do impact students, particularly those enrolled fulltime. Below (see Table 3) is an example of the schedules

implemented in the fall of 2017 with each block based on the type of degree or certificate a student is pursuing.

Table 3. Structured Schedule Blocks – Fall 2017

General Education – Option 1 (16-17 cr.) – CONSENT REQUIRED					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
8:30-9:45	WRIT 101-01 Jana Parsons 77358	PSYX 100-01 Elfie Neber 77378	WRIT 101-01 Jana Parsons 77358	PSYX 100-01 Elfie Neber 77378	
10:00-11:15			COLS 103-02 J. Dyskstra 77367		
11:30-12:45	CAPP 131-06 Deby Gunter 77366	MUSI 103-01 Cindy Stevens 77376	CAPP 131-06 Deby Gunter 77366	MUSI 103-01 Cindy Stevens 77376	
1:00-1:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	

General Education – Option 2 (16-17 cr.) – CONSENT REQUIRED					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
9:00-9:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	
10:00-11:15		WRIT 101-04 L. Ruggiero 77360		WRIT 101-04 L. Ruggiero 77360	
11:30-12:45	PHL 110-01 Michael Shell 77377	COLS 103-04 C. Merja 77369	PHL 110-01 Michael Shell 77377		
1:00-2:15	CAPP 131-02 Deby Gunter 77365	COMX 115-02 Larry Vaccaro 77373	CAPP 131-02 Deby Gunter 77365	COMX 115-02 Larry Vaccaro 77373	

General Education – Option 3 (13 cr.) – CONSENT REQUIRED					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
10:00-11:15	COMX 115-05 Sandy Bauman 77375		COMX 115-05 Sandy Bauman 77375		
11:30-12:20	WRIT 101-60L M.Wright	WRIT 101- 60L	WRIT 101-60L M.Wright	WRIT 101- 60L	

Table 3 Continued

1:00-1:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	
2:30-3:20	RD 101-01 Leanne Frost 77381	COLS 103-06 Greg Stivers 77371	RD 101-01 Leanne Frost 77381		

General Education – Option 4 (13-14 cr.) – CONSENT REQUIRED					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
10:00-11:15		WRIT 101-04 L. Ruggiero 77360		WRIT 101-04 L. Ruggiero 77360	
11:30-12:45	SOCI 101-01 A Rolando 77382		SOCI 101-01 A Rolando 77382		
1:00-1:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	
2:30-3:45	COMX 115-03 S. Bauman 77374	COLS 103-08 Staff 77372	COMX 115-03 S. Bauman 77374		

Pre-Health Science – Option 1 (13-14 cr.) – CONSENT REQUIRED					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
9:00-9:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	
10:00-11:15	WRIT 101-03 L. Ruggiero	COLS 103-03 Robin Williams	WRIT 101-03 L. Ruggiero		
11:30-12:45	PSYX 100-02 D. McCulloch		PSYX 100-02 D. McCulloch		
1:00-2:15	BIOH 108 Quincie Lords	BIOH 108 Lab Quincie Lords (1:00-2:50)	BIOH 108 Quincie Lords	BIOH 108 Quincie Lords (1:00-1:50)	

Engineering – (17 cr.)					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
8:30-9:45		CHMY 141-01 Joe Barlow		CHMY 141-01 Joe Barlow	CHMY 141-01 Lab 8:30-11:20
10:00-11:15	COMX 111-01 Larry Vaccaro		COMX 111-01 Larry Vaccaro		
11:30-12:45		PSCI 210-01 C Roberts	COLS 103-01 Kathy Meier	PSCI 210-01 C Roberts	

Table 3 Continued

1:00-2:15	WRIT 101-07 L Ruggiero		WRIT 101-07 L Ruggiero		
2:30-3:20	M171-01 Mark Plante	M171-01 Mark Plante	M171-01 Mark Plante	M171-01 Mark Plante	

CIT – (17-19 cr. depending on math)					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
10:00-11:15	CSCI 105-01 Chris Mee 77346	COLS 103-09 S. Bauman 77040	CSCI 105-01 Chris Mee 77346		
11:30-12:45					
1:00-2:15	CSCI 100-01 S Robinett 77302	WRIT 121-01 M Wright 77141	CSCI 100-01 S Robinett 77302	WRIT 121-01 M Wright 77141	
2:30-3:20	MART 231-01 Tim Paul 77345	MART 231-01 Tim Paul 77345	MART 231-01 Tim Paul 77345	MART 231-01 Tim Paul 77345	

Accounting – (17 cr.)					
Time	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
9:00-9:50	Math	Math	Math	Math	
10:00-11:15	ACTG 101-01 Val Fowler 77054	BGEN 105-01 Kerry Dolan 77050	ACTG 101-01 Val Fowler 77054	BGEN 105-01 Kerry Dolan 77050	
11:30-12:45		CAPP 131-04 Chris Mee 77317	COLS 103-01 Kathy Meier 77032	CAPP 131-04 Chris Mee 77317	
1:00-2:15		WRIT 121-01 M Wright 77141		WRIT 121-01 M Wright 77141	

Although the learning communities' cohort model and block schedules are based on best practices (Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert & Barefoot, 2016), it means students have less flexibility when it comes to choosing their class times as you can see based on the schedules depicted above in Table 3.

The participants who will be continuing their education at GFCMSU will experience another significant change as the campus moves from the traditional 16-week long semester to what is being referred to as the 8-week advantage. Beginning in the fall of 2018 for most general studies courses, students will complete two 8-week blocks of classes within the 16-week semester, with all courses switched to this model by the fall of 2019. Students will take half their classes during the first eight weeks and the other half, during the second eight weeks, thus taking 2-3 classes in each block if they are enrolled full-time. According to the GFCMSU Media Release (Card, 2018), this change is:

Designed using high quality, high impact practices, the 8-Week Advantage has a focus on increasing retention, on-time graduation and overall student success...The Advantage gives students the opportunity to focus on two to three courses in each 8-week section, which will lead to earning more credits and faster completion, saving students both time and money. Through more condensed scheduling, students will build stronger connections with their faculty and classmates, engage in more hands-on experiences in class and in the community, as well as have access to more research opportunities (para. 2, 3).

Although the 8-week advantage had not been implemented at the time the final interviews were held, some of the participants were aware of this pending change or when relevant, I informed them. In the case of LC, who had just found out that she was pregnant, this pending change meant that she might not need to take 2 full semesters off. Here's what she said after learning about the 8-week block classes:

I kinda decided in my mind I was going to take a class this summer, but I was going to take fall and spring off, but you're right, that would be perfect timing. I could take A&P in that block.

RE had this to say: "I figure if I was going to do microbiology in 8 weeks, I might as well do it in the summertime and get used to it." TT, who noticed that students tend to disappear from class during the latter half of the semester said:

The 8-week blocks might be beneficial in deterring that mentality, but still like maybe the second 8-week block of the spring semester will still have issues because that week-long break will still leave people with issues transitioning back to school. But who knows.

The change to 8-week blocks is a prime example of how institutional changes impact students directly as well as other aspects of their microsystems and will require those in the moving through phase of attending college to adjust to another transition. Again, how well individuals cope and adjust to change will play a role in how students are impacted by the new 8-week advantage.

A remaining theme that emerged related to the exosystem was access to scholarships. There are four main sources of college scholarships: federal grants, scholarships and grants from colleges, state grants and scholarships, and private scholarships (O'Shaughnessy, 2017). Two participants commented on this issue.

NT: I just thought of something else that I have struggled with a little bit is scholarship opportunities for someone who is in my position. I found that the scholarships that are available for someone who is in my position, there's the STEM one and the science one I can apply for but in comparison there's a lot for single mothers, single fathers and child care ones, or childcare assistance, but there's nothing for students who have to drive in from out of town or for students who have to work part time or things like that.

EE: One thing, it would be nice to have a way to find scholarships. They just kind of tell you to apply for scholarships, but what scholarships should I apply for? I have a hard time figuring it out, so I just don't... I get on the scholarship website on GFCMSU and it's just this huge list. I don't even take a look at it. And it's my own fault, but you get five deep that don't apply to you. It just takes too much time. They tell you to apply for scholarships, go do this and it's just not an easy process. You go to the website, you might get spam, so it's just not easy.

There are other aspects of the exosystem that have the potential to influence nontraditional students, however these areas are the ones that consistently emerged as themes during the interviews.

Macrosystem

The final circle of Bronfenbrenner's theory represents the Macrosystem which includes cultural beliefs and ideologies. In focusing Bronfenbrenner's concept of the macrosystem specifically on college students, Evans et al., (2010) suggest that, "College going (that is, who goes to college, who goes to what college) is shaped by the macrosystem, as well as by the sociohistoric influences related to economics, the workforce and societal values" (p. 165). For the purposes of this study, I will address cultural ideologies related to specifically to age and gender. This discussion will further address Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college? and will explore the themes identified for Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

A key aspect of the macrosystem as it affects nontraditional students is the question of who goes to college and when should they attend and impacts the experience of nontraditional students on campus (Evans, et al., 2010). During the analysis using Schlossberg's transition theory, I explored the situation surrounding the participants' transition to college and one specific aspect of the situation is the "timing" of the transition which relates directly to our society's age norm that suggests that individuals should attend college directly after graduating high school, without any gaps in their

education. Such age norms generally define at what point in their lives individuals should go to college, establish careers, get married, have babies, retire, etc. Students who wait to attend until they are older are out of sync with such age norms and the social clocks established by our culture (Crandell, et al., 2012). As we have seen by the themes that have emerged, this in turn creates unique challenges for nontraditional students within their microsystems and in terms of how they are affected by policies created by institutions and organizations in the exosystem. It is perhaps most evident in the themes that emerged from the participants in terms of how they initially felt on a college campus at this stage of their lives:

TT: It's a little bit culture shock being surrounded by people 10 to 11 years younger than me. I just feel, I don't want to say superior, it just feels I'm completely separated by – I don't know how to explain how I feel separate, I just feel like I don't belong with them and I just don't really interact with them.

EE: I was really stressed out more than the first time [I attended college]. I would ask myself what am I doing, I shouldn't be doing this cause I'm a lot older... There's been times when I felt like an old fuddy duddy."

JA: I feel sometimes so much out of place because a lot of the students are younger.

BB: I feel like when you come back there's kind of like this feeling like you have to almost fight for validity. It's like you feel like you don't really belong because it's like you missed your window so you really have to fight for that.

SA: It's tough. It's getting easier. There's been some circumstances you know, I don't want to say I've been discriminated against, I felt that way.

WH: Stressful and overwhelming because it felt like I was out of place. I was not a true freshman, I'm a little bit older than the majority of people in my class.

RE: I think that they look at me like 'why are you doing this?'

These comments are a reflection of our culture's age norm that individuals beyond their late teens or early twenties are not expected to be enrolled in college as their education "should" have already been completed by the stage of life the participants are currently in. In defying these age norms, the comments by the participants suggest that their age adds a layer of challenges to their transition to college not experienced by traditionally aged students.

Gender

Just as culture informs social and age-related norms, it also creates gender norms. How individuals are socialized based on their gender, begins even before birth when parents choose to paint a girl's room pink and boy's room blue. Research shows that more often girls are socialized to be nurturing, empathetic and connect with others. In contrast, boys are pushed to be more independent, competitive, dominant, self-reliant and hide their emotions (Aycock, 2011, Bem, 1981; Weir, 2017). Some studies have even found that communication is positively reinforced in females and negatively reinforced in males and may be the reason why females are more likely to report distress when they lack emotional social support, but males do not identify this as a factor (Aycock, 2011, p. 16). Schlossberg (1981) found a key gender difference to be that women are permitted a free expression of emotion in contrast to men who are socialized to hide their emotions.

These differences in the ways in which males and females are socialized in our society are likely affect not only how an individual adjusts to being a college student, but also the major and career path the choose. A prime example of this is shown in the

demographics by gender of certain professions. For example, 70.2% of physical therapy assistants are female, (Physical Therapy Assistants and Aides, 2016), only 12% of nurses are male (Hess, 2017) and in contrast 96.4% of all welders are male (Welding, Soldering and Brazing Workers, 2016).

What is perhaps most fascinating in reviewing the career choices or majors of the participants, is that some are pursuing paths that defy the typical gender norms. Table 4 shows the major/career goal of each participant based on their gender at the time of their final interview:

Table 4. Major/career goals by gender.

MALES	Major/Career Goal
AD	Medical Assistant
BB	Nursing
IB	Criminal Justice
JHM	Nursing
JA	EMT/Firefighter
JV	IT/Network Support
MJ	Retired Teacher/no goal
NT	Was PTA, but is switching to welding
RE	Respiratory Therapy
SA	Civil Engineering
TT	PTA or possibly forensic psychology

Table 4 Continued

WH	Civil Engineering or Addictions Counselor
FEMALES	
EE	Dental Hygiene
JHF	Dental Hygiene
KW	Dental Hygiene
LC	Nursing
PW	Nursing
PVL	Nursing
PK	Uncertain
SH	Possibly Counseling
SW	Dental Hygiene
TK	RN

What is most noticeable in reviewing Table 4, is that every female that has decided on a career goal is pursuing a profession that society views as appropriate for and is dominated by females. In reviewing the males' career choices, there is actually more variety, with several of the males defying gender norms and choosing career paths in fields that have been predominately female, such as nursing, medical assisting, physical therapy assistant and respiratory therapist. In terms of the Macrosystem, this may reflect more flexibility in societal attitudes about acceptable careers for males.

This exploration of career choices helps illustrate how gender norms tend to operate and influence individuals. This relates to a key issue to be addressed in research subquestion three as to whether men and women differ in their descriptions of their experience in transition to college, and particularly are there differences in how they cope?

Table 5 shows a comparison the words used to describe the initial transition to college by gender.

Table 5. Description of the initial transition to college by gender.

Males	Initial Transition	Females	Initial Transition
AD	Exciting, hard	EE	Terrifying, scary
BB	Intimidating	JHF	Hard
IB	Weird. overwhelming	KW	Very rough
JHM	Like running into a wall, hard	LC	Scary
JA	Out of place, fun	PW	Fine
JV	No problem	PVL	Overwhelming
MJ	Different than 30 years ago	PK	Frustrating
NT	Interesting	SH	Terrifying
RE	Interesting	SW	Intimidating, hard
SA	A struggle, One of the most difficult things I've attempted	TK	Horrific

Table 5 Continued

TT	Wild, anxious		
WH	Challenging		

In reviewing the words used to describe the initial transition, four of the males used rather neutral terms such a fine, interesting, or different and only one of the female's used the word "fine." The remaining participants used words that conveyed that the initial transition presented challenges for them.

To deal with the difficulties that accompany transitions, individuals cope in different ways. In the data analysis based on Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Goodman, et al., 2006), it was shown that individual manage their stress in three different ways: changing the situation, redefining their stress or managing their stress. Changing the situation is considered to be a problem focused approach whereas redefining the problem or managing stress is seen as an emotionally focused palliative approach. It should be noted that "help seeking" under "Changing the Situation" refers to asking others for specific help either with school related issues or home responsibilities versus seeking support under "managing stress" refers to emotional support such as seeking encouragement or reassurance, talking with someone, etc. Table 6 shows which methods are used by participants broken down by gender

Table 6. Coping strategies used compared by gender.

MALES	Changing the Situation	Redefining the Problem	Managing Stress
AD	Help seeking Optimistic action Time Management	Building on previous success Positive self-talk Ignoring negative/focus on positive	Self-care Meltdowns Seek support
BB	Help seeking Time Management		Self-care Seek support
IB	Help seeking	Ignoring negative	
JHM	Time Management Create change	Building on previous success Reframing failure Ignoring negative/focus on positive Using Humor	Seek support
JA	Help seeking		Seek support
JV		Ignoring negative	
MJ	Help seeking		
NT	Help seeking		Self-care Seek support
RE	Help seeking	Reframing failure	Self-care Spirituality Seek support
SA	Help seeking Lifestyle Changes	Normalizing challenges	Self-care
TT			Self-care
WH	Help seeking Lifestyle changes	Positive self-talk	Self-care Seek support
FEMALES			
EE	Help Seeking	Building on previous success Situation is time limited	
JHF	Help seeking Time Management	Building on previous success Normalizing challenges Positive self-talk	Self-care Visualization Seek support
KW	Help seeking Time Management Optimistic Action	Situation is time limited Ignoring negative	Self-care Seek support
LC	Help seeking		Seek support

Table 6 Continued

PW	Help seeking		Seek support
PVL	Help seeking Optimistic action		Spirituality Seek support
PK	Help seeking		Self-care Seek support
SH	Help seeking Optimistic action Time Management		Self-care
SW	Help seeking Optimistic Action	Reframing failure Situation is time limited	Self-care Meltdowns Seek support
TK	Help seeking		Self-care Seek support

In viewing Table 6, it is evident that both males and females used problem focused and emotionally focused coping methods and based on the themes that emerged from the interviews, there appears to be little difference based on gender.

A theme that emerged that I found surprising and appears to be gender related was that a number of males expressed a desire to lead or mentor other students.

AD: I see some of these students and I say to myself, yeah I was just like that. So I kinda feel like I talk to them and try to be a mentor to them because I want them to succeed. So when I got here, I joined the student government, so I'm a senator, and I'm a co-chair of the student resources committee.

MJ: I'm trying to be not in any way overbearing or overpowering or anything like that and yet at the same time, being sort of an example. I don't want them to make the same mistakes, so I try to be an example.

RE: People in my class I get to know them outside in groups and talk with them one on one level. That's my deal being older, it's my responsibility to share that wisdom and maybe share something that maybe they will come and talk to me about. Then I can share with them if it touches them.

What I found particularly interesting is that JHM had expressed feeling uncomfortable in asking for help from the tutors in the ASC and instead took a leadership role and set up informal study groups.

JHM: But you know for my math, I set up a study group with six people... So, I've got one for bio that we're starting to... So, I think for me it's better to have that group setting with people in the class versus the ASC.

JHM (2nd interview): So, like my math class, I'm actually helping four people in my math class on and off and then I'm helping three other people with their math classes that are a little bit lower than mine. My human bio class, you know I start come into open lab with me come and study with me, so I help people that way.

Although several females talked about helping classmates, not one expressed a similar desire to mentor or lead.

A final observation that seems to reflect a change to traditional gender roles is that two of the male participants took it upon themselves to take on more of the domestic responsibilities because they were going to college and not working,

JHM: I get TTD benefits, so I don't have to [work]. So I kinda take over the mothering role. So I take the kids to daycare, clean the house, do the dishes and cook supper and stuff, kinda take more off my wife's plate and let her grow her business and expand... She's the main provider.

TT: I had to pick up more responsibilities [in the home] leaving a fulltime job in the AF than while I was in. It kind of makes me respect housewives a heck of a lot more because just knowing there's so much that can be done around the house if you actually dedicate time to do it.

In contrast, for the female students domestic and childcare responsibilities were more likely to decrease and shift to their spouses in order to make room for college in their lives. EE, KW, LC, PVL and SW all commented this. Other than these

aforementioned differences, the themes suggest that males and females have similar experiences as they transition to college

In reviewing the themes that emerged through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and comparing these themes by gender, the findings are consistent with previous research on nontraditional college students. The implications of these findings will be discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter summarizes the results and research findings from interviews with 22 nontraditional college students using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. The study also explores the role of college personnel, programs and services and how these influence the transition to college. The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions:

Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the interviews were initially analyzed to see what categories and subcategories emerged and these were created as “Nodes” in *NVivo*. The main categories and their subcategories that emerged were: 1) Initial Transition to College including attitudes towards traditional students, previous college experience technology and support systems on campus; 2) Ongoing Student Experiences including campus involvement career decisions, course and major decision, successes and challenges; 3) Personality Characteristics including coping strategies, motivation and time management; 4) Personal Circumstances including employment, finances, health, living situation, reason for enrollment, relationships, and unexpected events; and 5) College Structural Issues including admissions, advising, ASC, COLS class, class format, faculty, library and orientation. The themes that emerged were discussed and the findings were summarized.

The same data was then analyzed using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. *A priori* codes were established from this theory. The first set codes reflected the type of transition whether anticipated or unanticipated. For 21 of the 22 participants it was anticipated and in a majority of cases, enrolling in college was precipitated by other life transitions.

Schlossberg’s theory explores transitions as have 3 stages, moving in, moving through and moving out of the transition, thus these were identified as codes. The interviews were analyzed to find the key themes in each of these three phases of the transition process.

To better understand how individuals cope with transitions, Schlossberg developed “The 4 “S” System: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. Data was

analyzed for each of these four systems and themes emerged that provided insight as to how the participants moved through their transition to college. In understanding the “Situation,” themes regarding the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience with similar transitions and other stressors were identified as codes. In exploring aspects of self, Schlossberg suggests that the following characteristics are important: personal and demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, gender, age and stage of life, state of health, ethnicity/culture and psychological resources including ego development, outlook, commitment, values, spirituality and resilience. Themes fitting these categories were coded, with particular focus paid to the psychological resources that participants displayed. The third is “Strategies” and this was used to explore how participants manage their stress whether through problem focused approaches that involve changing the situation or emotionally focused approaches that included redefining the problem and managing stress. Interviews were coded looking for examples of these three different methods of coping. The interviews were then analyzed for the final “S” support and themes related to participants’ support systems were discussed.

The findings that emerged from the analysis using Schlossberg’s Theory were then incorporated into and re-examined through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory. First, themes were categorized to identify key aspects of the microsystem that play the greatest role in the transition to college and these were family, community, school and work. The interactions between these microsystems was explored and ways in which they link and influence one another were identified. In addition, the developmentally instigative characteristics of the self, that had emerged in the analysis

using Schlossberg's theory were considered for the role they played in helping individuals negotiate the competing demands of their microsystems.

Themes related to the exosystem - systems external to the participants were categorized and their influence on the transition to college was discussed with particular focus on federal and state policies and programs as well GFCMSU itself to gain an understanding of ways which the institutional structure, policies and personnel influence the transition to college. Finally, aspects of the macrosystem were analyzed. In particular themes related to nontraditional students violating age related social norms about when individuals should attend college and how this influences the transition were addressed. Since social norms regarding gender are also a key part of the macrosystem, gender schema theory was incorporated and previous themes and findings were compared by gender with a particular focus on how participants coped with the transition to college and whether gender differences emerged.

The key themes that emerged through all levels of analysis were consistent with previous research on nontraditional colleges students, however there were some interesting and curious findings that will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the transition to college for nontraditional students through the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981). Chapter one provided the rationale for the study, the conceptual framework, an explanation of the above-named theories, why they are relevant to the study of nontraditional students and the guiding research questions. Chapter two summarized literature relevant to this study including characteristics of nontraditional students and the challenges they face, gender schemas as they relate to coping styles, relevant research on college students using Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and institutional factors as they relate to nontraditional students. Chapter three discussed the research design, context of the study, positionality and reflexivity, population and sample, instruments, procedure, data analysis and methods for ensuring the validity of the study. In Chapter four, I analyzed the data and described the research findings first using emerging themes and categories and then in the context of the conceptual framework of this study.

In this chapter, I will present my conclusions regarding the themes that emerged involving the phenomenon of the transition to college. I review my findings in a manner that seeks to answer the overall research question and the three guiding subquestions and these will be related to previous research regarding nontraditional students and their

transition to college. In addition, I will explore what new or interesting information emerged as a result of using the framework of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the limitations of this study, the implications for future research and practical application of the findings.

Overview of the Study

As previously discussed, this study explored the experience of 22 nontraditional students at GFCMSU during their transition to college. Data shows that nontraditional students have lower completion rates than their traditional counterparts. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 31.4% of those over age 25 who earn associates degrees go on to earn bachelor's degrees in contrast to 60.9 % of students under the age of 20 and 43.3 percent for students between the ages of 20-24. In addition, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2016) reported that for the cohort entering college in 2010, 25.9 percent of traditionally age students did not earn a degree or certificate in contrast with 49.3 percent nontraditional students who had enrolled in post-secondary education as part of 2010 cohort. To improve these numbers, it is critical to understand more about nontraditional students and the challenges they face when it comes to degree completion.

In addition, most institutions still tend to be geared towards serving traditionally aged students. Lynch and Chickering (1989) suggested that higher education is out of sync with the needs of nontraditional students and although their work was published

almost 30 years ago, many of issues they raised and recommendations they made have been supported and enhanced by more recent research. As recently as 2014, Kasworm recommended that institutions review their policies and procedures because many were still ineffective in supporting nontraditional students on their campuses. Thus, a secondary purpose for this study was to determine the ways in which the institutional policies of GFCMSU help or hinder our nontraditional student population.

The following research questions were used to guide this study in an effort to find answer and illuminate areas for further discovery:

Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

To explore these questions, I conducted two to three open ended interviews with each of the 22 participants during which I asked them to describe the experience of becoming a college students, what factors influenced their adjustment, why they enrolled in college, how they coped with the transition, what role the institution played in their transition, which campus resources they used and the ways in which the campus helped and/or hindered their transition.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I completed an initial analysis of data using *NVivo*. *NVivo* is qualitative data analysis software designed specifically to help researchers organize and analyze text-based data. From this initial analysis, the following five categories emerged: initial transition to college; ongoing student experiences; personality characteristics, personal circumstances and college structural issues. Within each of these categories, subcategories were developed based on the data which will be discussed further in this section. The data were then further analyzed using *apriori* codes based on constructs developed from Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory. In applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, gender differences that emerged both in the initial analysis and in the framework of Schlossberg's Theory were explored within the context of the macrosystem and institutional factors were addressed with the context of the micro and exosystems.

Conclusions and Related Literature

In chapter four, I presented detailed findings regarding the key themes that emerged from this study. Included were numerous quotes from participants that illustrated the themes, along with tables to compare themes by gender. Overall my findings were consistent with previous literature, however some interesting nuances emerged that may bear further exploration, and these will be discussed in this chapter.

To begin with, it is important to note that even the demographics and characteristics of my participants, were consistent with how previous research described

typical nontraditional students. Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) Ross-Gordon, (2011) and Saunders & Bauer (1998) all found that nontraditional students are more likely to commute and attend part time, continue working - often full-time, and juggle multiple other responsibilities. Since GFCMSU does not have dorms, all student commute. Of my participants, 10 of the 22 were enrolled part time; 5 participants worked fulltime, 9 worked part-time, 15 were married or lived with a partner and 9 participants had children under the age of 13. Thus, we can see they represent typical nontraditional students based on characteristics identified in previous research.

Participants' Experience Transitioning to College

My first set of interview questions were designed to seek an answer to research subquestion 1: *How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?* Thus, participants were asked to describe their experience of becoming a college student and what factors influenced their adjustment. In the face of the initial analysis using emergent coding and themes, my findings were consistent with previous findings about nontraditional college students.

Reasons for Enrollment

In the past, researchers found that nontraditional students tend to enroll out of economic necessity motivated by the goal of being able to find suitable employment (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2007). This was true for 9 of the 22 participants. A rather curious finding is that six of the participants had successful careers in which they earned a decent income, but were motivated to make a change in their lives and train for

employment that was more personally meaningful to them and gave them a greater sense of purpose. Four of the six were either close to or in middle adulthood. This is significant in that developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, suggests that the psychosocial crisis of this life-stage is “generativity versus stagnation” (Crandell, et al., 2012). A key task in successfully resolving this crisis is the desire to contribute back to society in some way and do something meaningful that leaves a positive legacy after death (Crandell, et al., 2012). This desire was very clear in the interviews with AD, RE, JHM, LC, SH and TK. LC, SH and TK, enrolled in college without a clear goal, but with the desire to possibly find a new career that would give them a greater sense of meaning. This quote from SH illustrates this:

... Like I said, I’m still not really sure about a direction. I’m trying to figure that out. I’m just enjoying the ride so far... I’m really interested in health administration, but then I was thinking I like to help people, so maybe I could be a counselor so then I started looking at that.

In searching the literature, I could not find data related to whether there is a correlation between age and choice of helping careers, however this issue was identified anecdotally in an interview with Jacquie Scarborough, an advisor at Cape Cod Community College, who had this to say: “

The students the adult learning center works with tend to fall into two camps (with some overlap), those who are looking for new careers out of economic necessity, and those who are looking for a second career that will allow them to give back in some way” (Shemkus, 2011, para 2.)

This would certainly be an interesting area for further investigation to determine whether adult who are in Erikson’s stage of “generativity versus stagnation” (Crandell, et al., 2012) are more likely to enroll out of desire to find a career in a helping profession.

And then there was my oldest participant, who enrolled in one class simply for the enjoyment of learning. He represents a whole different type of student not generally captured in the literature on nontraditional students. He did state that he was able to enroll because MSU offers free tuition to residents of the state of Montana who are over 65. The literature suggests that nontraditional students' motivation to enroll is extrinsic – namely economic gain (Scalley, 1993; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007), yet for least 6 of these participants, the motivation to enroll was purely intrinsic.

Initial Transition

Participants consistently found the initial transition stressful, regardless of whether they had been previously enrolled in college or this was their first experience attending. Even those who earned bachelor's degrees previously and had been successful students, still found the transition back to college daunting. Length of the break between enrollments also didn't matter, re-enrolling was still stressful. This suggests that institutions should not make assumptions that students need less support during their enrollment period simply because they have previously been college students. Themes that consistently emerged were technology, learning how to study, read textbooks, write papers, where to find information needed for class and fitting in on campus. Even those students who had been previously enrolled in college, were surprised to find the significant role technology now played in their classes. As suggested by previous research, a number of participants did not expect that school would consume so much of their time or how this in turn would impact other areas of their lives. This is consistent with previous findings that nontraditional students often find themselves academically

unprepared, and lack the study skills needed to be successful and do not clearly understand the amount of time required to complete course work (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, Kasworm, 2014; O’Conor, 2009; Powers, 2010; Saunders & Bauer, 1998).

At least some of the stress of the initial transition seemed to come from adjusting to the ways in which technology was now being used in courses whether it was the online learning system or publisher websites such as “My Math Lab.” Participants had various levels of experience with technology, but even those who used computers as part of their jobs, still found it challenging to adapt to the use of technology on campus. These findings are not surprising. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 52% of adults over the age of 30 were “relatively hesitant” users of technology (Horrigan, 2016). Of the 48% considered “relatively more prepared,” only 17 % were considered “digitally ready” in terms of their knowledge and use of eLearning tools (Horrigan, 2016).

Support and Campus Engagement

As previous research found, participants were able to get through the initial transition by finding support systems on campus, whether these were informal – connecting with other students in their classes or using formal resources such as the academic success center. In some instances, participants strategically reached out for support and in others, luck played a role. In LC’s case a traditionally aged student reached out to her. AD and JHM encountered students they had known in high school who provided tips and encouragement to them. Regardless of how the support system is developed, research shows that it is critical to nontraditional students’ success to form

connections with other students in their classes (Kasworm, 2014; Samuels et al., 2011-2012) as a majority of participants did.

This is particularly important since nontraditional students are less likely to become engaged in campus groups or activities (Gilardi & Guglieletti, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013; Samuels et al., 2011-2012; Saunders & Bauer, 2008). This was consistent with my findings that a majority of the participants were either not interested or had no time to get involved on campus, although there were some exceptions. Two participants immediately decided to get involved with student government. Four used the Veterans Success Center because of the resources it provided such as computers, printing and food, but they did not participate in the socializing activities because of time constraints. Three attended special events on campus such as those associated with No More Violence Week, Mental Health Awareness and Suicide Prevention. One was excited to be involved in the Service Saturdays organized by the campus student activities coordinator. A few participants stated it would probably be a good thing if they had time, others were very clear that they had absolutely no interest in getting involved. These quotes sum up what a majority of participants had to say about involvement with campus groups: JHM:

“School, study and go home, that’s pretty much it;” SW: “I wish I could say yes I have, but I haven’t... I have to be real about my limitations, there’s just too much.”

Attitudes Towards Traditionally Aged Students

Previous research suggests that nontraditional students may feel self-conscious and out of place on a college campus (Inman & Mayes, 1999; O’Conor, 2009; Saunders and Bauer, 1998) and some participants expressed this directly, but for others this was

expressed in participants' attitudes towards traditionally aged college students. They clearly felt as if they were in a different place from them maturity wise and in some instances, superior to them. For example, JA who is only 26 felt like he had to "go down" to their level. JHF felt like she couldn't relate to them "I don't watch the things they watch and don't listen to the music they listen to and that's fine. KW said, "so a lot of us older girls are more proactive, we get stuff done and we do it the right way." LC said:

It's I amazing to be around I call them the youth.... They show up, it's kinda like they don't have an understanding and maybe I was the same way. They just kinda show up and they're not really engaged, they're just there... My views are a lot different I can tell you that. They're very hopeful. They see things through rose colored glasses and that's a good thing. Sometimes you want to be like listen and let me actually tell you how it is.

MJ said, "It's kind of hard for me to think in terms of trying to relate to someone under 30." PW said, "I find it really funny being an older student. You just kind have your shit more together than the 18, 19 ,20- year old." RE felt that a lot of the younger students didn't have a good work ethic and SA actually felt discriminated against by some of the younger students. SH found the opinions of younger students amusing and said "They have no life experience to back up what they're talking about." TT also commented that he felt different from them and doesn't interact much with "them." Instead he mentioned making a point to connect with other nontraditional students in his classes. Several participants also felt that traditionally aged students had an advantage in that they enrolled directly from high school and seemed to know their way around academia better.

These feelings towards traditionally aged students are relevant in terms of how they influence the initial adjustment to college. The sense of separateness and difference

expressed by a number of the participants can potentially reinforce the notion that they do not belong and should not be enrolled in college that has been identified in previous research by Inman and Mayes (1999), O’Conor (2009) and Saunders and Bauer (1998). On a campus like GFCMSU, where 45.3 % of the student population is nontraditional (Factbook, 2016) this may be less of an issue, but needs to be considered as a major adjustment factor on campuses whose enrollment consists of a high percentage of traditionally aged students.

Analysis Using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

Research subquestion one was further explored through the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to determine whether this elicited any new insights into the transition to college.

Orientation and “Moving In”

In the book, *Counseling Adults in Transition*, Goodman et al. (2006) do not specifically address the transition to college, but their section on “moving in” phase of starting a new job identifies relevant issues applicable to the transition to college. Goodman et al (2006) discuss the importance of providing a thorough orientation to new employees to help prepare them for their job responsibilities and found 50% to 60% of new employees quit within 7 months of being hired because they are not adequately prepared. Schlossberg et al., (1989) addressed the need for adequate orientation in the book, *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults*, stating, “They [students] need to become familiar with the rules regulations, norms and expectations of the new

system” (p.15). In light of previous research that suggests nontraditional students are often unprepared for the culture of academia, the rigor of college and have low completion rates, (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Saunders & Bauer, 1998), applying Goodman et al.’s (2006) and Schlossberg et al.’s (1989) insight regarding the importance of orientation seems relevant especially since this theme emerged from participants.

In addition to the need for a general campus orientation, participants expressed the need for a more thorough orientation about technology and the OLS as well as orientation within their individual classes since each instructor has different rules and expectations. Looking at the issue of orientation in the context of Schlossberg’s “moving in” phase of a transition provides insight into why the initial transition to college is rough for so many students and may be a contributing factor why some never make it to the “moving through” phase. These findings suggest that adequate orientation plays a key role in nontraditional students’ adjustment to college and can help ease the transition.

“Moving Through” and the Role of the Four “S’s”

In analyzing the interviews through the lens of the “moving through” phase, what emerged was the ongoing challenge of balancing school with other responsibilities and staying motivated in the face of the constant grind of attending class, studying, completing assignments and taking tests. This is where the analysis using Schlossberg’s 4 ‘S’ provides insight into the factors that contribute to persistence,

Schlossberg’s 4 “S’s” consist of situation self, support and strategies, and in exploring each these for the participants, offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics

that contribute to students successful moving in, through and out of college. In considering the situation that led to and surrounds their college experience, Goodman et al., (2006) suggest the trigger, timing, role change, control, duration, concurrent stress and attitude need to be considered. One thing was clear in this study, the trigger for enrolling in college varied by student, but so often it was prompted by another transition in their life. According to Arthur & Hiebert (1996), “Thus, transition into higher education is embedded in other transitions happening in the lives of most adults” (p. 94).

A good example is the four service members in this study who left the military and transitioned to college. Their transition involves significant role change and concurrent stress in the form of living in the civilian world again. Even though all the veterans in this study left the military through retirement or their own choice and thus had control, a college campus is significantly different environment from structured, hierarchal environment of the armed forces. Similarly, the participant who enrolled after getting out of prison also faced a completely new and less structured environment.

Whereas vets are seen in positive light because they have served our county, someone who has been incarcerated leaves that environment with a negative stigma and faces rejection by society. Although, WH reported a positive experience and felt welcome on the GFCMSU campus, this may not be the case on all campuses and would influence the transition.

Another simultaneous transition experienced by several participants was moving to a new community. In one instance this was prompted by the participant’s spouse being

transferred from Florida to Malmstrom AFB. This quote from PVL sums up all the transitions she encountered as a result of this move:

I think I shouldn't have moved and gone to school at the same time. That was probably the worst mistake because the whole move, signing papers, all that stuff. Needing the money so I'm working more, I'm fulltime and knowing the sciences it's a fulltime job basically going to school, so more like time management. Now that my schedule is like set, we're in the house, maybe I should have set my schedule and then started, but live and learn.

Six participants moved to Great Falls specifically to attend GFCMSU and in two instances, this move resulted in the participants needing to adjust to separation from their families during their enrollment.

These additional transitions inherent with the transition to college also contribute to the concurrent stress in students' lives which may be a factor in persistence. The level of concurrent stress is also related to whether or not the students added a role to their existing roles or changed roles and whether the decision to enroll in college is the result of other major life transitions such as those discussed in the previous paragraph. For those participants who added the student role, dealing with concurrent stress increased the demands on their already limited time. LC whose injured mother came to live with her and AD helping care for his grandmother were prime examples of this. In the case of NT, the stress of his wife's miscarriage led to a complete reevaluation of his career path. How these individuals dealt with their concurrent stress along with other adjustments associated with the transition to college had much to do with their attitudes and aspects of self.

In exploring the “Self,” in addition to considering gender and demographic information, Goodman et al, (2006) emphasize the importance of psychological resources including, ego development, outlook and self-efficacy, commitment and values as well as spirituality and resilience. Not surprising, a majority of participants demonstrated higher levels of ego development, a positive outlook, a sense of self efficacy, resilience and commitment to their education.

Previous research suggests that improved economic prospects (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007) are a reason for nontraditional student’s enrollment, however taking a closer look using the four areas of commitment – interpersonal, altruism, competence/mastery and self-protection as identified in Goodman et al., (2006), gives us a more nuanced understanding of why nontraditional students enroll and what factors contribute to their persistence. Sixteen of the participants did identify competence/mastery goals as their reason for enrolling and persisting. Included in this category were those who enrolled to improve their career opportunities, but seven of 22 participants were motivated altruism – wanting to get into careers where they could help others. Six participants were committed to being role models for their children and other family members. Reay (2003) found that women who framed their educational pursuits as “doing it for my family” (p. 309) were able to deal with the feelings of guilt associated with neglecting parental duties and instead saw themselves as positive role models for their children’s educational pursuits. Using Schlossberg to examine the participants’ commitment provides a multi-faceted understanding of all the factors that motivate

nontraditional students to persist, one that contradicts the research that says their motivation is primarily economic (Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007).

Most of the participants had an optimistic outlook and positive explanatory style which seems crucial for “moving through” their education. They were able to overcome past failures and learn from poor performance rather than giving up. Not surprising, the two students who had a negative outlook and negative explanatory style for interpreting events (Goodman, et al., 2006), also had the most challenges with getting through the semester. At the time of his final interview JV was concerned with failing his classes and PW had withdrawn during her first semester, but according to her was doing well when she reenrolled the following semester. One might conclude that a positive outlook and explanatory style is critical to persistence, but this was not necessarily the case. In a study of nontraditional male dropouts conducted by Powers (2010) using Schlossberg’s Theory, she found that eight of her 14 participants saw themselves optimists, three as pessimists, two as realists and one was a “goal setter.” All 14 saw themselves as resilient, yet all 14 dropped out of college and did not persist. Although, it would seem that an optimistic outlook and positive explanatory style and related to persistence, this may not be the case as Powers found in her study.

Participants consistently exhibited high levels of self-efficacy. This was demonstrated in their recognition of importance of effective time management and a sense that they had control in structuring their time as well as in their willingness to seek help. On the other end of the continuum, JV and PW, made comments that illustrated lower levels of self-efficacy. PW stated, “You’re not in control of any more of lots of

things,” and JV, “there’s no external motivation to do it other than the instructor saying you need to get this done when you take classes face to face. But it doesn’t work as well online. I’m horrible at it.” Powers (2010) found that her participants had high levels of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control, and they felt in control of their decision to drop out which for 12 or her 14 participants was made as result of deciding that the cost of attending college was not worth the benefit. Whereas high levels of self-efficacy played a role in persistence in this study, based on Powers’ (2010) research, it also plays a role when nontraditional students consciously make the decision to drop out and thus can play a role for students who persist and those who withdraw.

There were also numerous examples of how resilient these participants were and these examples were summarized in Chapter 4. Resilience is generally defined as “... a blend of characteristics in an individual. These may include characteristics such as being positive, focused organized, proactive, and flexible (Goodman, et al, 2006, p.74). Resilience is critical in an academic setting because it allows students to bounce back whether from receiving a poor grade or overcoming a history of poor college performance from previous enrollments. The ability to be resilient further plays a role in how individuals deal with the concurrent transitions that can occur when they enroll in college. Goodman et al., (2006) suggest that hardiness also needs to be considered as a related concept. Maddi, (2005) has done extensive research on hardiness and has operationalized it as containing three components: commitment, control and challenge. According to Maddi (2005), “The hardy attitudes structure how you think about your interaction with the world around you and provide motivation to do difficult things” (p.

175). In looking at the interview themes, these participants demonstrate hardiness with their high levels of commitment to their goals, sense of control over their destinies and their willingness to take on the challenge of going to college. Since not all students who enroll have hardy attitudes, whether they are traditional or nontraditional, the findings by Maddi (2005), that hardiness can be taught is relevant to campuses. His HardiTraining program consists of teaching hardy skills and attitudes. The skills taught include: coping, social support, nutrition, relaxation, and physical activity which in turn help build commitment, control and challenge (Maddi, 2005). Interestingly, the skills taught through HardiTraing were the very skills that emerged from the data analysis when it was evaluated in the context of Schlossberg's third and fourth "S" -- strategies and support and indeed, participants reported using every one of the skills identified by Maddi (2005)

Not surprising, the students who were successfully moving through by the time of their second or third interviews all demonstrated strong coping abilities. Goodman et al, (2006) identified three types of coping strategies: changing the situation, redefining the problem, or managing stress and a majority of the participants showed strong coping skills in that they utilized at least two to three of these approaches. Only two participants identified only one type of coping strategy. TT used self-care to cope and JV identified only "ignoring the negative." What makes JV's strategy interesting is that he was the one participant who disclosed that he was really struggling and wondered whether he would pass his classes. He seemed to cope by pretending he wasn't doing poorly and that he could still pull-off passing grades even though he hadn't been keeping up with the work. Even though this is an isolated case, his situation illustrates importance of having

effective coping strategies. JV seemed to know what he needed to do, yet he just didn't do it. Similarly, IB who disappeared from classes mid semester, identified help seeking and ignoring the negative as his two coping strategies, but did not actually engage in help seeking with campus personnel when circumstances emerged that led to his disappearance from classes. According to the campus New Student Coach, he did not approach her or his instructors to discuss his circumstances. So not only is it important that students identify coping strategies, but also use them. These findings are consistent with Goodman et al.'s (2006) research that suggests that individuals fare better when they have flexible coping skills and recognize the difference between circumstances that are under their control and those that are not.

The other strategies that emerged that are significant is the importance of time management skills and being realistic about how many classes to enroll in. Although part-time enrollment was found to be a key predictor of dropping or stopping out (O'Connor, 2009; Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007; Wade, 1995), it should be noted that those participants who enrolled part-time did so because that was what their schedule permitted. AD, SH and PVL all withdrew from one or more classes, in order to make their course work manageable along with their fulltime jobs and other life responsibilities. This ability to make such a judgement also reflects a higher level of ego development, because at lower levels they would be more likely to simply withdraw from school completely. In their circumstances, attempting to enroll in more credits to reach fulltime status would likely be overwhelming and could result in students not continuing their education at all. So, despite research that shows lower persistence rates

for part time students, full-time enrollment is not the answer for students like AD, SH or PVL. It should be noted that Taganuchi & Kaufman (2007) did find that for females with time constraints, part-time enrollment increased the likelihood of degree completion.

O’Conor (2009) and Taganuchi and Kaufman, (2007) also found that part-time enrollment results in less engagement on campus and less interactions with peers and faculty, and they suggest a greater effort needs to be made in the classroom to help part time students connect with peers and teachers. The best example from this study is LC who had a traditionally age student reach out to her and become her study partner after she heard LC introduce herself and disclose how scared she felt about enrolling in the class. According to LC, this was key reason she remained enrolled. Faculty helping to facilitate those kinds of connections in the early days of class through ice-breaker or other group activities are critical.

A key strategy identified by a majority of the participants was the importance of a support system either on campus and/or at home, which is consistent with previous research (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2001; Kasworm, 2014; Renn & Reason, 2013; Samuels et al., 2011-2012; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). With the exception of AD, participants in this study had supportive partners and especially for those participants with young children, they knew this was critical and frequently said they could not succeed without the practical support provided by their partner. What helps mitigate the lack of family support is finding alternate support systems which AD did when he got involved in Student Government. In addition, in looking at his psychological resources, he had a high level of commitment to pursuing his education and frequently demonstrated self-efficacy.

Support systems are critical, but a lack of support can be overcome if the individual has strong psychological resources available as identified by Goodman, et al., (2006).

What the analysis using four “S’s” highlights are the strengths, determination and resilience of these nontraditional students. This is consistent with the findings of Compton, et al. (2006) who challenged findings that view nontraditional students from a deficit model and instead suggest that they are better equipped to deal with the student role because of their previous life experience. The nontraditional students in this study demonstrated this by treating school deadlines like they would job deadlines and using time management skills they had developed during their employment. Even their willingness seek help and ask questions likely evolved out of their previous life and work experience.

Several past studies that have used Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to investigate nontraditional college students (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996; Karmelita, 2016; Livingston, 2009; Powers, 2010). Based on the type of details that emerged and were discussed in the literature review in the studies conducted by Arthur & Hiebert (1996), Karmelita, (2016), Livingston, (2009), and Powers (2010), I felt the use of this theory helped provide an in-depth understanding of the participants, their circumstances and the personal characteristics that helped them transition to college in a way that the initial analysis of the data did not uncover. Using the 4 “S’s,” highlighted their strengths and strong coping abilities and what emerged was a portrait of a resilient and determined group of students.

Analysis Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

Data were further also analyzed using the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to see what further insight would emerge for research subquestion one: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college? In addition, in this section I also discuss where Schlossberg's Theory and Gender Schema Theory interact with Ecological Theory and within that context address research subquestion two: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender; and three: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

Overlap between Bronfenbrenner and Schlossberg

The understanding of the "Self" and "Strategies" that comes from using Schlossberg's constructs as identified in Goodman et al. (2006) provide insights into the kinds of developmentally instigative characteristics of the individual that are needed to successfully navigate the multiple systems of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory whereas "Situation" and "Support" gave me insight into components of their microsystem. To quickly review, the *microsystems* are the activities and relationships the individual interacts with on a daily basis such as work, school, family, and community; *mesosystems* are the interactions between the microsystems; *exosystems* are systems external to the individual that influence their microsystems such as government agencies, media, extended family and the educational system; *macrosystems* are the greater cultural

and societal structures that influence the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem; and the *chronosystem* represents the socio-historical context and environmental events with in which the various systems operate (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Developmentally instigative characteristics include the response individuals will bring forth from their environment based on their personality traits; how individuals respond and engage with their environments in different ways, some with curiosity and engagement – others by observing from a distance, whether an individual’s structuring proclivities involve a willingness to risk or the choose to minimize engaging in new challenges; and finally their directive beliefs about their environments and how much of their accomplishments are within their control versus attributed to luck or situational factors (Evans, et al., 2010). The aspects of self, identified through the use of Schlossberg’s theory, include the psychological resources of ego development, outlook, self-efficacy, commitment, resiliency as well as coping strategies directly relate to how the individual responds to their environment and how the environment responds to them. It further highlights the strategies individuals use to negotiate the competing demands of their microsystems as well as challenges created from the exosystem and macrosystem.

The majority of the participants in this study had a strong sense of self efficacy and effective coping strategies and thus effectively juggled the demands of their microsystems. Powers, (2010), Scalley (1993) and Wade, (1995) found that the inability to juggle multiple role demands was a primary reason for nontraditional students dropping out of college which illustrates why self-efficacy and effective coping strategies are so essential. Based on the data, most had characteristics that resulted in their having

positive interactions with their environment and in turn, they responded positively to their environment, embracing the new challenges associated with becoming student

A good example is that 13 of the 22 participants discussed their challenges with technology during the early weeks of class, but in every case their response was to take on the challenge and learn how to use it. They did this either by figuring things out for themselves or asking peers, tutors or eLearning for help. This is a great example of how being willing to risk and take on new challenges allowed them to master the technology needed to be successful in their classes. In contrast, individuals who are less likely to engage in new challenges might have given up within the first week of class when faced with learning to use D2L and other aspects of technology that are integrated into courses.

Developmentally Instigative Characteristics and Environment

In further examining these developmentally instigative characteristics, it is interesting to compare differences between students who struggle and those who are able to motivate themselves. JV in particular stands out because he was not one of the students who identified the initial transition as difficult or stressful, yet by his own admission he lacked self-motivation and was not doing well in his classes. In his case, he was 20-year veteran of the Navy and he reported that he was used to being told what to do and when to do it. The structure of the military as a part of the macrosystem and exosystem seemed to contribute to his having a weak sense of self-efficacy and needing a high level of external motivation and control if he was to succeed. JA, who had been in the Marine Corps for six years, also needed the motivation of having to pay money back to the government as a catalyst for doing his schoolwork. This is however not consistent with

Livingston's (2009) findings on veterans. In his study, he found that veterans embraced going to college as their new "mission" and applied the coping strategies they had learned in the military such as self-discipline, self-reliance and a focus on their goals.

The other veterans had characteristics more consistent with Livingston's (2009) findings. TT admitted that he struggled with motivation at times, but was able to bounce back and motivate himself without the need for extrinsic controls.

I was worried I was going to fall into my old ways with procrastinating. I almost started getting that way in about the middle of the semester when things were just very repetitive and I almost fell off the wagon a little bit before Thanksgiving... I stopped studying a whole lot, I just didn't do a whole lot. Now that Thanksgiving is over and I didn't do very well on a test and I got a 74 instead of where I needed to be, I was like oh crap! That's my own fault. Instead of blaming it on the professor and saying oh that professor sucks, I sucked for the past two weeks and I deserved that. So thankfully it has not hampered my grade all that much and I'm making up for it by busting my butt.

What may be different for TT is that he was an officer whereas JV and JA had been enlisted personnel. However, in complete contrast KW, who had been enlisted, was highly self-motivated and disciplined and very much reflected the characteristics that Livingston (2009) found. This demonstrates the two-way relationship with how developmentally instigative characteristics influence the individual's responses to aspects of their micro, exo and macrosystems, but these same systems also influence what instigative characteristics are reinforced. What was it about JV's personality that led to him lose any sense of self-efficacy? One consideration is that JV was attracted to and remained in the Navy in the first place because of its highly structured environment in which decisions were made for him. Another consideration is the length of his service in that he served 20 years and retired from the Navy. JA discharged after four years, TT

after six and KW after eight years. For the latter three, leaving the security of the military suggests that their personal characteristics include a greater willingness to take risks and engage in new challenges.

The frequent use of help seeking behaviors further illustrate developmentally instigative characteristics that are conducive to being a successful student. Eighteen of the 22 sought help when they encountered challenges. Their willingness to do so along with an environment that offered help in the form of supportive instructors and free tutoring contributed to their successful transition. This also demonstrates participants' sense of self-efficacy, that they are in control of their outcomes rather than leaving them to luck.

These examples of the ways in which these participants had characteristics that elicited positive responses from their environments, conquered challenges, and felt that their success as students was within their control also relates their interactions with aspects of their microsystems. Exploring the data within the constructs of Ecological Theory highlighted the importance of support from the participants' various microsystems, particularly their families, work environments.

Effects of the Mesosystem

The mesosystem “comprises linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 163). It is within the context of the mesosystem that the participants' coping strategies and developmentally instigative characteristics have the opportunity to shine because it is within this context

that they must navigate and juggle their various microsystems. How effectively they are able to do this is directly related to their developmentally instigative characteristics.

Byrd & McDonald (2005), Inman & Mayes (1999), Saenz, et. al., (2007) all found that a lack of family support was a key factor in students not completing their educational goals. What stands out from this study is that a majority of the participants had the support of either their significant other or their extended family. Family members provided both emotional and practical support that allowed these participants to focus on their schoolwork. This replicates the findings from several studies that support from the spouse in navigating multiple roles and demands is critical (Schuldt, 2011; Scott et al., 2011; Sweet & Moen, 2007). However, to get such support, participants had to be willing to ask and accept help which demonstrates effective coping skills on their part.

This also raises the question of what happens when there is a lack support from the family microsystem. AD was the one participant whose partner was not supportive and felt threatened by his enrollment. The mesosystem in this case is the interaction of the family microsystem and the school microsystem. In AD's case he simply found support in another microsystem – the campus. Research by Barefoot (2000), Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011), Meuleman, Garret, Wrench & King (2014) and Renn and Reason (2012) suggests that this was an excellent strategy for him to use in coping with lack support at home as they consistently found that being engaged on campus and finding peer support was an important factor for retention and persistence. LC's mother was not emotionally supportive of her decision enroll, but strong encouragement and practical support she received from her husband mitigated her mother's negativity. The way both

of these participants dealt with negative attitudes from family members also relates back to their developmental instigative characteristics in that they responded by sticking with their decision to enroll and finding support from other sources which demonstrates that they are individuals who feel they are in control of their destinies.

In addition to the level of support, events that happen to family members also impact students. These may be related to changes in employment that result in needing to move as in the case of PW, being a military spouse and needing to change duty stations as PVL experienced, or a family member getting sick and needing to care as occurred for LC and AD. What needs to be recognized is that what happens in the lives of students' immediate family members has the potential to negatively impact students' ability to continue attending college. Although, the student's level of self-efficacy will influence how they respond, there are some instances where they literally have no control and must simply adapt and make a new plan based on their change in circumstance. The best example is PVL who would like to complete the nursing program at GFCMSU but realizes that may not happen because her husband is in the Air Force.

So that's the only thing that sucks about the military and going to school, you have to pick something that you can do anywhere else and my credits can transfer and all that stuff. That's the one thing like man, if I get in the program and then he has to leave, then we're leaving. That is one struggle. But you can't think like that or you'll go insane.

Her quote illustrates how she recognizes this potential but is able to cope with it and does not let the situation deter her from achieving her goal.

In considering other aspects of the microsystem, a supportive work environment emerged as a theme. This group of participants was fortunate to have employers who

supported their educational pursuits by being flexible about work schedules and allowing participants to set their schedules around their school demands. This is not always case. As an instructor I have seen what happens when employers are not supportive and call students into work or meetings when they have classes scheduled. Scalley (1993) found issues related to employment as one reason students drop out, thus this finding of having supportive employers is significant and in the data analysis, participants demonstrated the ways in which this helped them persist. However, the participants were also very proactive in finding the kinds of employment that would work around their school schedules with this again highlighting aspects of their personal characteristics and how these influence environments. KW, AD, and TT made it clear to their employers up front when they could work and what their availability was and they had employers who respected that. PVL found that her work schedule was not conducive to her doing well in school, so she spoke to her boss and requested a schedule change.

It was those midnight to 7 am and then trying to go back to sleep in the morning but I have a test, so in my head I can't go back to sleep. It was rough... I talked to my boss and she now understands that my school is coming first so she's been putting me on more of the earlier shifts so I'm able to focus.

A final way the workplace influences students is with tuition reimbursement programs like SH had in her place of employment. Although only one participant had this benefit, it is an important way that employers can support the educational pursuits of their workers.

In exploring the mesosystem, interaction between the participants' work and school and work and family emerged as having the most influence. No significant themes

emerged related to the community or organizational groups such as churches that sometimes play an important role.

Bronfenbrenner and Educational Systems

The GFCMSU campus is part of the microsystem and research question 3 asked: “What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?” This will be discussed in this context of the microsystem along with the influence of exosystem including federal and state policies related to higher education as well as institutional policies that played in their transition to college.

Admissions. Overall, participants gave the campus high ratings in terms of having positive interactions with faculty and staff. Participants’ first experience was generally with the admissions personnel. With the exception of one participant, all found the admissions personnel helpful. SH had a negative experience with a financial aid person who was on the phone making a personal call and left her waiting. She felt that the attitude of some people in the registrar’s office was that she should know how to enroll. One of the recommendations to institutions by Schlossberg et al., (1989) was to be vigilant around gender and age issues and recognize that for most nontraditional students a college campus is alien territory. This quote by SH sums it up:

Some of the attitudes were like well you should know this, like in the registrar’s side of it. Why should I know this? This is nothing I’ve done in 30 some years and it was a whole lot different when I was 17 years old and had just graduated high school.

Since she was the only one who reported this experience, in applying Ecological Theory, I have to consider whether there were characteristics about her that may have elicited this

response from the environment. However, it is reminder for institutions to follow Schlossberg, et al.'s, (1989) recommendations and train personnel not to assume that individuals enrolling, regardless of age, know what to do.

In contrast to SH, WH had a positive experience and this was more typical of what participants had to say

The administration part of becoming a college student, I would have to say I was flabbergasted. I was amazed at how welcoming this facility was. With my background and everything I've had, in the moment I was self-conscious and lacked self-confidence because of my background, but these guys were just open doors, open arms, just willing to help me along with anything I needed.

WH was the participant who was on parole and has a prison record. His statement suggests that he expected to be treated poorly because of his record and instead, he was thoroughly surprised by his positive interactions with admissions staff. In this case the environment was affirming and potentially helped overcome negative structuring proclivities on the part of this student. This example shows how attitudes of the admissions staff can make all the difference for those who may feel insecure about enrolling, whatever the reason may be. This may be especially relevant for first generation, nontraditional student for whom a college campus and the world of academia is unfamiliar territory (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Saunders & Bauer, 1998).

The only other negative comments were that the whole application process was confusing and "a pain." This is significant in that could serve as a deterrent for some people to complete the enrollment process. It can also be seen as an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate their determination and persistence from the moment they

begin the enrollment process which is something they will need to rely on as they move in, through and out of their education. Thus, even as a part of the admissions process, the structuring proclivities of the individual determine whether they successfully move through the admissions process and become a student. It may be important to recognize that simply getting through the enrollment process reflects a level of commitment that institutions need to foster and build upon.

Advising. In the next stage of the admissions process, participants meet with their advisors who play an important role in helping them set and achieve their educational goals. Themes regarding advising were mixed with some positive experiences and some that suggest there may be areas for improvement. LC, RE and SH all made comments that suggested that the advisors were not really understanding what they needed. SH said, “I have talked to actually two different advisors, one male and one female, both younger than myself and they were just not picking up on what I was putting down.” RE said,

I think for older students they need to beef up on some of the stuff...
Sometimes an elderly guy likes to be led little bit because he’s trying to
make decisions that are different from when you went to college before.

LC wanted someone with whom she could explore career options and felt this was lacking. Both SH and RE were also exploring new career possibilities. Having advisors be more knowledgeable about careers, especially for those disciplines offered by the college, may be an important aspect of advising that needs to be incorporated in their role. Taganuchi and Kaufman (2007) concluded that persistence for adult learners is influenced by the individual’s perception that the time investment and cost of earning a degree will benefit them in the long term. Thus, having an understanding of the kinds of

careers their enrollment will prepare them for is essential, otherwise students may not feel that it is worth their investment of time and money to continue. NT, who enrolled with goal of entering the Physical Therapy Assistant (PTA) program, withdrew after such a cost/benefit analysis. He is a Canadian citizen and planned to return there with his family. He said, “I actually just withdrew from the college. Part of it was that I discovered that PTA does not have as many positions for the investment that I need to take care of my family up in Canada.” He planned to reenroll in the fall but in the welding program stating:

So I took a look into welding and compared what the jobs were going to be like between PTA in Canada and Welding in Canada, and as far advancement goes there’s no comparison. The highest in PTA is the lowest end for a welder.

When LC enrolled, she did so with the possible goal of getting nursing degree but wanted a deeper understanding of what the career options might be if she earned her ASN or BSN. In her case, where she has fulltime job and career in the insurance industry, knowing how continuing her education will benefit her in the long run is likely to be an important factor whether or not she persists. This suggests that strong advising center is an important part of the college campus microsystem. A recent report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement found that “...effective advising may have a larger impact on returning students and thus colleges’ persistence and graduation rates” (Smith, 2018, p.1).

Orientation. The third area of the campus microsystem that plays a significant role in the initial transition to college is the orientation process. At the time these participants

enrolled, the orientation for new students was called Essential Start and was a free one-day class they could either attend on campus or take online. The content included topics such as how to be successful student, financial aid information, and technology training to familiarize them with the eLearning system. Some found this helpful, others did not. JHM said, “I didn’t gain much.” SA said, “If I hadn’t been face-to-face in that class I would have been hurting... I wish the orientation in that area [technology] would have been more.” Schlossberg, et al. (1989) point out the importance of adequate orientation because “They need to become familiar with the rules regulations, norms and expectations of the new system” (p.15). In fact, BB who was a returning student lamented the fact that there was no orientation for him because of that.

As part of orientation, new students who have never been enrolled in college need to take COLS 103 Becoming a Successful Student. Comments on the class were mixed. Some found it very helpful, others did not. AD felt like the content was more relevant to traditionally aged students and that the content for nontraditional students needed to be different and focus more on how they can balance their competing roles. One participant suggested the content is useful but needed to be delivered before enrolling in classes if it is to be useful.

These comments combined with the findings regarding the importance of orientation in Goodman et al. (2006) and Schlossberg et al. (1989) suggest that this is an important area for colleges to invest in. Because GFCMSU realized that Essential Start was not effectively meeting student needs, they tried a different approach this year which did not impact the participants of this study. The format of Essential Start was changed so

it now focuses exclusively on technology training. This is the current description on the campus website: “Essential Start is a training session that teaches students how to use the learning management system (Brightspace), student email, and more.” In light of the data that emerged regarding technology being one of the stressful aspects of the initial transition, this recent change has the potential address this issue.

In addition to improving the technology orientation, the campus also scheduled an “Opening Day” event from 11:00am to 2:00 pm on the Saturday before classes started. New students were encouraged to attend and bring their families. The day included lunch, a welcome from the Academic Dean, tours of the campus, information tables for the different divisions and programs of study, access to financial aid and advising staff, and special sessions on Disabilities Services, Career Exploration, What Family Members Need To Know, Time Management, Scholarships and Financial Aid, Veterans Success Center, Student Activities and Organizations, Academic Mindset, and Information about childcare. I was asked to lead the session for family members by the Director of the Advising Center, in part because he thought that nontraditional students would bring their partners and children to such a session and it would be an opportunity to address their concerns and help them better understand what to expect. Interestingly only parents of traditionally aged student attended, but I do think the idea was good as a way to get families invested in the student’s education. At this point, it is unknown how effective this day was in providing a more useful orientation, however it does show the campus is willing and open to changing strategies if they sense something is not working as well as it should. One of Schlossberg et al.’s (1989) concerns was the most college campuses are

rigid bureaucracies that are often resistant to change which appears to be less true of GFCMSU. Research by Bamber and Tett (2000), Hanniford and Sagaria (1994), Kerka (1989) and O’Conor (2009), all concluded that having flexible service hours for all campus resources was essential to helping nontraditional students feel welcome on campus. The proximal factors including GFCMSU’s small size and informal campus culture likely contribute to this flexibility.

Academic Success Center. Once students are enrolled, the campus is committed to their success. One way this is demonstrated is through the Academic Success Center which provides free tutoring in a variety of subjects. It was clear from their interviews that a majority of participants value this service and they do not hesitate to use it. In their study of first generation, nontraditional college students, Byrd and McDonald(2005) found that participants identified “Self-advocacy - the ability to speak up for oneself and seek help when needed as an important factor for their success. In comparing traditional with nontraditional college students, Morris, Brooks & May (2003) found that nontraditional students were more likely than traditionally aged students to use task-oriented coping which they defined as actively seeking a solution. In this case it would utilize tutoring services. Even the participants that did not use it, said they were aware of it and would consider using it in the future should the need arise. This is a useful service for campuses to provide, but students must also choose to use it as a resource. This directly relates to the developmentally instigative characteristics of the participants, in particular a willingness to explore and investigate their new environment (Evans, et al., 2010).

Library Services. Although the library should serve as a resource much like the ASC, a concerning finding is the fact that the participants do not see it that way. Themes that emerged show that they use it as a quiet place to study or for access to computers, printers and scanners. Not one participant said they have gone there to ask for help with conducting research or finding materials for class projects. Nor were they likely to access it online and in at least one case, the participant didn't realize she could do this. I suspect this related to participants familiarity with internet search engines, at least that has been my experience as an instructor. This quote by TT may be indicative of many students' attitudes: "I feel like the library, while it's useful, I can find the same information from home or elsewhere on the internet. I feel that the internet is so advanced that libraries unfortunately are on a decline." This statement is concerning, especially considering research by Soria, Fransen & Nakerud (2014) and Haddow (2013) that found that students who utilized academic libraries had higher GPAs and better retention rates than those who do not. Haddow's (2013) study explored this relationship specifically for what she referred to as "mature age" students who were over the age of 21 and found that increased library use resulted in increased retention. When compared to students under 21 Haddow (2013) did find that the mature age students were more likely to use the library than the younger students during the second year of their enrollment, but less so during their first semester. Thomas, Tewell & Willson (2017) found that students will start off using library databases, but if they run into difficulties or can't find what they need in one database they are likely to switch to a search engine like Google. They also found that students are unaware of the role of librarians and the research assistance they can

provide. Komissarov and Murray (2016) concluded that electronic convenience was an important factor for students. They found that 40% of students used Google or Wikipedia to begin their search process, but often moved on to using library databases and half of their participants began their research using library databases. Although research strategies were not an area of investigation in this study, the lack of participants using the library is concerning especially given the data linking it to retention. Even though the studies cited here have also identified this as an issue, it appears that it may be a bigger issue at GFCMSU than at the campuses where these other studies were conducted.

Faculty. The other critical theme that emerged related to the campus is the positive comments about faculty. This is significant in light of previous research that demonstrated the importance of nontraditional students connecting with faculty (Kasworm, 2014, Samuels et al., 2011-2012). Even those enrolled part time including LC, PW, PVL, PK, SH and SW spoke of positive experiences with faculty. PK's quote sums it up: "The teachers I have, they're awesome. I feel like they really care about the students." Even SH who was only enrolled online had this to say: "Those instructors online are fantastic." One of the findings in the literature was that students enrolled part time were less likely to have positive faculty interactions (O'Connor, 2009; Taganuchi & Kaufman, 2007). Findings in this study clearly contradict this and show that it is possible for students enrolled part time to have a good relationship with their instructors. It should be noted the proximal factors of GFCMSU may make this possible with its average class size of 17 students and an 18:1 student to faculty ratio (GFCMSU Stats, 2014-2015). This may not be the case on larger campuses.

A further issue related to faculty is their willingness to be flexible with students when demands from other aspects of their microsystem make it difficult to meet course deadlines. Kerka (1989) identified the importance of faculty being flexible as a factor in retaining adult learners. This was further supported by O’Conor (2009) and Bamber and Tett’s (2000) research that campuses need to be sensitive and responsive to existing and emergent student needs. This quote from LC illustrates why this is so significant for nontraditional students:

My daughter had a medical emergency at the beginning of the last semester and I was afraid I would miss too much. Not a problem, they [her instructors] were like, nope, let us know what you need, let us know how we can work with you and it was like not a big deal. What a relief that was to know that they were willing to work with me. It was amazing.

In contrast PK became ill and had to withdraw from a writing class because the instructor didn’t allow for more than two missed days. This in turn caused her to lose her financial aid which created significant hardship for her. Her situation demonstrates the potential fallout when instructors are not sensitive to emergent student needs. PW had a similar experience when the instructor would not give her an incomplete after she became ill towards the end of the semester, however it is possible this was less due to a lack of flexibility on the part of the instructor and instead because of the institutional policy that a student must be earning a passing grade and have completed the course requirements to date in order to be granted an incomplete.

Course Delivery and Availability. Even though smaller class sizes and student teacher ratios provide major benefits to all students, the disadvantage of a smaller campus like GFCMSU is that they are not able to offer as many class delivery options as a larger

campus might. Related to this the significant theme that emerged include the lack of availability of evening classes. Numerous studies have found that making classes available evenings and weekends is essential to meet the needs of nontraditional students and helps them feel accepted on college campuses (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Kerka, 1989, O’Conor, 2009; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Considering that many nontraditional students work fulltime, Monday through Friday jobs, this may limit their options on the GFCMSU campus to only taking online classes as in the case of SH. It’s not her preferred mode, but she has been able to make it work for her which again speaks to her openness to take a risk and explore this new way of learning.

Since enrollment has declined over the past several years with a 14% decline this fall over the previous academic year (Office of Institutional Research, 2018), it is unlikely that there will be a change in the number evening classes offered. This is influenced by current economic factors including low unemployment rates as part of the macrosystem. According to the Montana Department of Labor and Industry (2018), the state unemployment rate as of July 2018 was 3.7%. Historically, the college has seen an increase in enrollment when unemployment rates are high. For example in 2012, enrollment peaked at 1,464 FTE in contrast to this semester’s FTE of 884 students. Unemployment in Montana peaked at 7.3 percent in 2010 and decreased to 6% by 2012 (Unemployment rate in Montana from 1992-2017, n.d.) and has continued to decline to its current rate. This demonstrates how events in the macrosystem can influence the microsystem as this decreased enrollment results in decreased funding which in turn impacts course offerings on campus.

Exosystem

Students are also impacted by factors in the exosystem including institutional policies, the Board of Regents and Montana University System, and state and federal government. A good example of this is a recent proposal to create one admissions portal for the entire MUS system (Strategic Initiatives, 2018-2019) to streamline the admissions process. While this will impact future students, current students, should they choose to transfer to a four-year campus, will benefit from the common course numbering that was implemented within the MUS with the goal of making transfers within the system seamless. This along with articulation agreements GFCMSU has made with other local institutions like The University of Providence-Great Falls and Park University (College Catalogue, 2018-2019), impacts students wishing to transfer and earn four year degree. While the MUS common course number was implemented system wide, GFCMSU initiated the articulation agreements with both the University of Providence and Park University. Themes related to this did not emerge during the current study but have the potential to affect participants who plan to earn a four-year degree, during the moving out phase like BB who is planning to apply to MSU Bozeman nursing program.

The agreements with the Great Falls institutions are significant for nontraditional students in that they may be place bound because of other family or work obligations (Kasworm, 2014) and particularly this is where the community microsystem, because it is small, provides limited options for continuing their education beyond a two-year degree. These articulations make it possible for participants to stay in their community and

continue their education in a face to face setting, should they prefer this to online degree programs.

Financing College. The main themes identified by participants as they relate to the exosystem were regarding FAFSA, the GI Bill, and access to scholarships. Under the current administration in Washington D.C., there has been much in the news about potential changes to FAFSA and especially changes in student loan repayment policies and student loan forgiveness (Thrush, 2018) which may play a role in the coming semesters as these participants move through their education. Changes in policy could even affect whether they persist and is an example of how the macrosystem impacts the exosystem which in turn affects the student.

Although none of the participants raised concerns about the application process and use of FAFSA to fund their education, to qualify students are required to enroll in a certain number of credits and for nontraditional students trying to balance multiple demands this can create issues. In the case of PK, who became ill during the semester and had to withdraw from a class, this resulted in her only being enrolled for 3 credits. This in turn caused her to lose financial aid which created significant hardship for her. The reason she had to withdraw from a class was due to the instructor's attendance policy. This is an example of how aspects of the class microsystem can impact the exosystem and vice versa. Although PK did not withdraw from school, the kind of stress associated with financial difficulties could impact her ability to succeed in her remaining class. Thus, this suggests that there needs to be awareness of how even something as simple as a class attendance policy can have major consequences for students. I know that as an

instructor, I know very little about financial aid policies and have never thought about how my class policies potentially impact students in this area. This suggests that it is important for campuses to educate their educators regarding financial aid requirements and their impact on students.

Another way students fund their education is through scholarships. Based on comments made by participants, it seems that there are some areas for improvement. EE's comment "They just kind of tell you to apply for scholarships, but what scholarships should I apply for? I have a hard time figuring it out, so I don't." This may be more of an issue for nontraditional students because of their other time demands. They benefit from applying for scholarships, but the application process can be daunting. NT brought up that there seemed to be few scholarships that he qualified for, but again if a different system were in place, he may have been able find some. The GFCMSU scholarship webpage (<http://finaid.gfcmu.edu/scholarships/index.html>) lists the scholarships by name, but other than when the name provides some indication of who or what the scholarship is for, students would need to sift through each one to find the ones they qualify for. So perhaps a way to streamline the application process or provide some quick descriptions under the links that indicate basic qualifications might make scholarships more accessible. On the other hand, one also has to consider whether personal characteristics play a role in who pursues scholarships. For example, SH who works fulltime and is taking 9 credits did apply and was awarded a \$1000 scholarship. She took the initiative to do the research and apply. However, this does not invalidate the

comments from EE or NT and this is an area that institutions may want to consider streamlining, if that is possible.

The importance of the GI Bill as a way funding education for veterans emerged as a theme. This is an area where we again see the interaction of the campus microsystem with the VA as part of the exosystem. Julie Rummel is the staff person in financial aid whose position includes helping vets access GI benefits. Several participants commented on how helpful she was with this process. This suggests that it is important for campuses to have a person who is able to navigate the VA bureaucracy and help streamline this process for enrolling students. GI policies can also serve as a motivator for students as in the case of JA who worked on improving his class performance once he realized he would need to pay back money from his basic housing allowance if he didn't pass his classes.

Academic Forgiveness. Although it was not a recurring theme, BB brought up GFCMSU's Forgiveness/Fresh Start policy which bears mentioning. Academic Forgiveness is available to degree-seeking students reentering GFC MSU and offers currently enrolled students a one-time, one year window of opportunity to petition for Academic Forgiveness, thereby allowing students who earlier had experienced academic difficulty to improve their academic standing and GPA.

(Policies & Procedures Manual, 2012). To be eligible, students must meet the following criteria:

1. Be a former GFCMSU student.
2. Return to College after a minimum absence of five years.
3. Be currently enrolled at GFCMSU

4. Have not been previously awarded Academic Forgiveness at GFCMSU
5. Submit their request for Academic Forgiveness within one year of re-admittance and after showing a term GPA of at least 2.0 GPA in at least 6 credits (Policies & Procedures Manual, 2012)

This is another example of how factors within the exosystem, in this case an institutional policy, impact nontraditional students. For BB, this policy made a huge difference in his transition to college and in fact, he decided to re-enroll after learning about the policy. It seems particularly significant as it relates to nontraditional students since they are the ones who are more likely to apply for it based on requirement two, that there have been a minimum of a 5-year absence from college. Figure 7 shows how many students have applied and received academic forgiveness over the past 5 years.

Figure 7: GFCMSU Freshstart/Academic Forgiveness rates by year.

	Processed	Approved	Denied
2018	7	7	
2017	6	5	1
2016	7	7	
2015	9	7	2
2014	9	9	

This is a significant policy in that eight other participants who had previously been enrolled in college right after graduating high school also reported doing poorly but were now earning good grades. Seven of the eight had been enrolled at other institutions and would not qualify, but for those who previously attended GFCMSU, this policy

really does provide a fresh start. Each of these nine participants all spoke of being immature during their initial enrollments and not having a clear cut goal, in contrast to a strong goal orientation and academic performance during their current enrollment. Offering academic forgiveness seems particularly relevant to nontraditional students with poor academic records, who want a second opportunity to earn a degree. In searching the literature, I could not find data regarding student success or persistence after receiving academic forgiveness, but it seems this bears further exploration.

Curriculum and Scheduling. A final way that the exosystem can impact students is through curriculum and scheduling changes. For example, at the first curriculum committee meeting of the Fall 2018 semester, a proposal was made by the Information Technology Systems Department Chair to implement a certificate program for Cybersecurity (Curriculum Committee, 2018). The program would be offered completely online with a target audience of those employed in the IT field who want to enhance their cybersecurity skills. A program like this creates additional opportunities for students like JV who was pursuing a AS degree in information technology systems. Because of its online format, it makes this training accessible to other potential nontraditional students who are employed. This is a good example of an institution recognizing the needs of adult learners.

A significant change being implemented at GFCMSU will create another transition for the participants as well as for new students enrolling this fall and that is the “8-Week Advantage” previously discussed in chapter 4. Based on high impact practices (Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert & Barefoot, 2016) this is an example of how

institutional policies as part of the exosystem impact the students and potentially other aspects of their microsystem. How well students adapt to the change will in part be determined by their attitude and structuring proclivities. Since this change was just implemented and participants in this study had not yet participated in this shift, it provides an excellent topic for future research as to whether the 8-week block system is beneficial to nontraditional student population.

Whether it is the Montana University System policies, federal and state policies or institutional policies, it is evident that as part of the exosystem they all impact nontraditional students and their transition college. In addition, policies and events at the exosystem level can result in changes that affect students as they move through college and even their ability to persist with their education goals. Particularly at the institutional level, such changes tend to be motivated by best practices such those advocated by Felten, et al. (2006), however this may not be the case in all parts of the exosystem, particular as federal support for higher education appears to be waning under the current administration (Thrush, 2018).

The Macrosystem and Gender Schemas

Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem includes the cultural beliefs and norms about gender roles and it is in this context that gender schemas form. Gender schemas dictate appropriate gender behavior and career choices. It is this context that I will explore research subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender, and determine whether there are significant differences in how males and females transition to college.

Research suggests that in our culture it is more acceptable for females to reveal their struggles and display their emotions whereas males are socialized to hide, control and minimize their feelings and any situational struggles they may be having (Wade, Tavis & Garry, 2015). Yet, in reviewing the data from the interviews when compared by gender, four of the male participants minimized the difficulty of transition to college calling it interesting, fun or no problem, in contrast to only one female, PW who called it “fine.” Ironically, the male who called the transition “no problem” was JV who was also the participant who struggled the most by his own admission. Similarly, PW who said the transition was “fine” also encountered obstacles during her first semester at GFCMSU.

Use of terms that minimized any suggestion of challenges related to the transition to college, made me wonder whether either JV and PW were alexithymic. The term alexithymia was introduced in 1972, by Peter Sifenos and literally means “having no words for emotions” (Muller, 2000, para 2). A study conducted by Bilotta, Giacomantonio, Leone, Mancini and Coriale (2016) suggests that alexithymia is adopted as a means of coping with high levels of negative emotionality or as an avoidant coping strategy. This seemed to fit for both JV and PW. JV did not acknowledge college as being stressful yet struggled tremendously with motivation and buckling down to do the work required of him to succeed. This is very indicative of the avoidant coping strategy of ignoring the negative which he utilized frequently. Similarly, PW called the transition “fine,” and yet when they Health Sciences Division Director happened to see me interacting with this participant on campus, she spontaneously disclosed to me that there had been problems with the student and that she had a history of taking incompletes or

failing classes at other campuses. In the analysis of her psychological resources in Chapter 4, she demonstrated a negative explanatory style and low internal locus of control, frequently blaming environmental factors when she encountered difficulties. In this case, both a male and female participant minimized the transition and yet struggled. This seems to be more a reflection of Bronfenbrenner's developmentally instigative characteristics rather than gender.

Even though several other male participants used the word "interesting" as a descriptor for the transition which tends to minimize any difficulties, it still suggests that there were challenges involved. Perhaps these participants felt too vulnerable using words like terrifying or intimidating and this was a means of self-protection. Schlossberg (1981) suggests that women are socialized in a manner that permits the free expression of emotion versus males who are taught to hide their emotion which fits with using a word like "interesting." Even a more recent study published in the New York Times found that boys still believe that as males they needed to be "...strong, athletic and stoic" (Miller, 2018, para. 1). Based on my small sample however, and the fact that this is a qualitative study, I cannot conclude that there is a significant gender difference in how participants described their initial transition to college. What would be interesting to explore further is whether individuals who minimize the challenges associated with the initial transition are more likely to struggle with persistence? Does this also make them less likely to acknowledge when they struggle in their classes and in turn, does this make them less likely to ask for help if they need it? If there is a relationship between the two, this could be valuable information for advisors.

When coping strategies were compared by gender, no significant gender differences emerged. Previous research has found conflicting results as to whether males and females resort to different coping styles. Some studies suggest that males are more likely to use problem focused coping strategies whereas females generally use emotion focused coping through seeking social support (Aycock, 2011; Day & Livingstone, 2003; Matheny et al, 2005; Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002; Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000). However a meta-analysis of research on gender differences and coping conducted by Tamres et al., (2002) suggest that women are more open about using coping strategies than males, again due to differences in socialization and that overall “there was no coping strategy that men engaged in more than women” (p.24). In comparing coping styles in this study, both males and females utilized changing the situation which is considered a problem focused strategy along with redefining the problem which is seen as emotion focused coping.

There was one unexpected theme that emerged from the male participants that was not evident for any of the female participants – that of being a leader or mentor to other students. AD, RE, MJ and JHM all made comments with this theme. JHM not only commented but acted on it. He was reluctant to ask tutors for help in the ASC, but instead started and lead his own study groups. AD is a leader in Student Government and RE and MJ do this by sharing their wisdom and being an example to younger students. Each of these men has at some point been in a leadership or management role, so becoming a student is a significant shift. When this theme emerged, I was reminded of something I read in the book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* by

Deborah Tannen (1990) in which she identifies that men live in a hierarchical world where their status is either one up or one down and conversations and actions are initiated to maintain and protect the one up status. By starting study groups, taking on a leadership role in Student Government and dispensing wisdom, these men all maintain their one-up status in their hierarchical world. This is significant when you consider that being a student automatically puts them in a one down position with faculty being in the one up because they are in a position of power over the students. Being leaders and mentors helps them regain a one up status in the hierarchy and because of their previous leadership and management roles, is a familiar place for them. Even though KW was the president of her dental hygiene class, she did not seek this role but rather was nominated for it. This was the one significant gender difference that emerged in analyzing the data

Another curious finding was that married female students often rely on their mates to take over some of the household chores and responsibilities when they enroll in school in order to make time for schoolwork. In contrast JHM decided because he was no longer working full time and his wife was, he would take over the child care and household responsibilities because his wife was breadwinner of the family. TT's wife, who worked fulltime as a civil engineer informed him that now that he no longer had a fulltime job, that he would be expected to take responsibility for more chores around the house. In JHM's case it's interesting that he perceived that he would have more time being student than when he worked full time and in TT's case this was his wife's perception. Both saw this situation as fair because their spouses worked full time. I think it is great that both these men have taken over these responsibilities since research

suggests women are still the one's responsible for a majority of the childcare and household chores (Schuldt, 2011; Sweet & Moen, 2007). According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) men are spending more time on household chores and childcare in the past decade and perhaps this is reflection of a cultural shift in gender roles within the macrosystem.

I did not set out to necessarily compare career choices, rather did so as a way of illustrating the power of gender schemas in selecting a career. Interestingly, every female participant had chosen to prepare for a traditionally female career whereas there was much more variety for the males with several headed towards careers in nursing, respiratory therapy and physical therapy assistant. Because the sample is small and because of the nature of the programs of study offered on campus with the high concentration of programs in the medical field that are generally dominated by females, this finding may not be that significant, but would be interesting to explore further.

The difference in the ways in which men and women are socialized in our culture also relates to Bronfenbrenner's "developmentally instigative characteristics." As part of these, Bronfenbrenner suggests that individuals elicit different responses from their environment based on personality traits, but I think it is safe to say that a person's gender also plays a role in how the environment responds to them and what behaviors are reinforced. This would relate to emotional expression and what is acceptable and what is not. Weir (2017) suggests men are socialized to be tough, self-reliant and restrict their emotional expression. Participants in Edwards and Jones (2009) study of male college students reported that as males they felt they were expected to be "...competitive, in

control of emotions or unemotional, aggressive, responsible, the breadwinner, in a position of authority, rational, strong, successful, tough and breaking the rules” (p. 214-215). These findings were further supported in the recent poll of boys aged 10-19 published in the New York Times (Miller, 2018) in which males reported that they were expected to be strong, play competitive sports and other than expressing anger as aggression, they should be quiet and suck up any other feelings. It is likely that a participant like JV has had such norms reinforced by his environment throughout his life. Even though he is now in an environment that encourages asking for support and help, this is foreign to him and thus his response is to “observe from a distance,” rather than exploring what his new environment has to offer him in terms of support. His behavior of “observing from a distance,” is likely a means of hiding vulnerabilities behind the traditional male mask discussed in the study of male college student by Edwards and Jones (2009). The third aspect, is whether an individual’s structuring proclivities include a willingness to risk or remain stagnant. JV remains stagnant rather than trying new strategies to help him be successful as a student. Although he takes some responsibility for his lack of success, his tendency is to blame environmental factors such as his classes being online and his need for someone outside himself to provide motivation rather than looking at aspects of himself.

In contrast, a number of the male participants did not hesitate to identify the transition as challenging and difficult, and despite cultural norms that encourage self-reliance, they were willing to seek help. This included AD, BB, IB, NT, RE, SA and WH. The difference seems to lie in the fact that these participants were more likely to respond

to campus environment with curiosity and engagement. They were also willing to risk and challenge themselves and saw themselves responsible for their success.

In reviewing the data based on gender, there do not seem to be major significant differences by gender other than the theme of wanting to be a leader or mentor identified by several of male participants and possibly a greater tendency to minimize the stress of the transition by males. Overall, both genders found the transition to college challenging and demonstrated how important it is to have a variety of coping strategies to navigate their new role as a student along with their other responsibilities.

As with previous researchers who have used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory as way of exploring some aspect of college students (Denis, et al., 2005; Holles, 2016; Pinder-Amaker & Bell, 2012; Renn, 2003, Renn, 2004, Renn & Arnold, 2005; Taylor, 2008), I also found it to be an effective way to investigate, personal, environmental and contextual factors that influence transition to college for nontraditional students. Use of the theory, allows for consideration of how aspects of the self interact with the environment and how the various systems interact with one another and influence the transition. Integrating relative aspects of Schlossberg's 4 "S's" helped to further operationalize aspects for the self and the microsystem that play such a significant role in adjusting to college

Even with using the lens of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory, many of the findings from this study were still consistent with previous research on nontraditional students' transition to college and only minor gender differences emerged. From the analysis of data, it is clear

the phenomenon of the transition to college is stressful and requires a period of adjustment. However this study much more aligns with the findings of Compton, et al., (2006), who suggested that nontraditional students are actually better equipped to face the challenges of higher education because of their previous life experience in contrast those researchers who tend to view nontraditional students from a deficit model. Indeed, the phenomenon that emerged is that these participants are a hardy, resilient group equipped with strong coping skills that have helped them successfully negotiate the challenges of becoming college students.

Based on their comments, GFCMSU is welcoming environment for nontraditional students however there is still room for improvement. Several themes for further research were identified as well as implications for practice at GFCMSU that will better meet the needs of this student population.

Limitations of the Study

The findings and implications from this study are limited by both place and participants. The campus is a small two-year commuter institution located in a sparsely populated rural state. The participants were nontraditional students, and although some had lived in other countries and states, they were all current residents of Montana, attending the same institution and the findings are limited to their perceptions and experiences of the transition to college. The majority were white and heterosexual with only two students' identifying as Native American, two as Hispanic and one as gay. There are also limitations as to the types of students drawn to the campus based on the

small number of degree programs offered and the strong emphasis on the medical field. The findings from this study may not be applicable to larger campuses or nontraditional students in urban areas where the population is likely to be more diverse.

Implications for Future Research

In exploring themes that emerged from the data, areas for further research regarding both nontraditional students and college campuses were identified. These areas include: nontraditional students' attitude towards traditional students and how these impact adjustment; whether there is a relationship between minimizing the challenges of the initial transition and persistence, the relationship between alexithymia and intrinsic motivation; nontraditional males' need to mentor and persistence; adjustment issues for students with criminal records; whether there is a link between type of student orientation and persistence; and specifically at GFCMSU, the impact of the new 8-week block schedules on nontraditional students.

Nontraditional Students' Attitudes Towards Traditionally Aged Students

In addition to the theme that they initially felt out place on a college campus which is consistent with other research, in this study, participants expressed attitudes that could be described as feeling very different from and even superior to traditionally aged students. This is likely a way of expressing their sense of feeling out of place. It would be interesting to explore this issue further, particularly in terms of how it influences adjustment on college campuses where traditionally aged students comprise a much higher percentage of the student population than at GFCMSU. Do such attitudes

exacerbate a sense of “otherness” and how does this affect the initial transition and persistence?

Minimization of Transition and Persistence

Although this only relates to two participants, it would be fascinating to explore whether a tendency to minimize the stress of the initial transition is related to greater academic difficulties and in turn persistence. Another way of approaching this would be explore how being alexithymic affects the ability to adjust and cope with major transitions. In addition, one of these students struggled with procrastination and the other clearly lacked intrinsic motivation,

which raises the question of whether there is a link between alexithymia and lower levels of intrinsic motivation which in turn influences whether or not students persist.

Males and the Desire to Mentor

I found the theme of nontraditional male students wanting to be mentors intriguing and it would be interesting to determine whether this finding is significant from a larger population of male students. If it is, is there a way to use this desire to mentor as a way to increase campus engagement and thereby persistence? Is there a way to create and steer males to mentor/leader roles that even newly enrolled nontraditional students could participate in?

Altruism as a Motivation for Enrollment

The fact that several participants were motivated to return to school to pursue new careers that would help them serve others and provide more meaning and purpose in their

lives would be interesting to explore further. This is in contrast to previous research that suggests nontraditional students enroll seeking careers that will provide economic gain. How does the motivation to enroll out of altruism influence persistence? Of participants citing this reason for enrollment, one was 30 and the rest were either close to 40 or over 40. Thus, considering the ages of the nontraditional students may be relevant as this seems more prevalent for those students in middle adulthood who fall into Erikson's "generativity versus stagnation" phase in contrast to those in early adulthood whose task according to Erikson is "intimacy versus isolation" (Crandell, et al., 2012).

Adjustment and Acceptance for Students with Criminal Records.

Another area that has yet to be explored in depth is adjustment to college for those students with prison records. It was interesting to learn how welcome WH felt on the GFCMSU campus, but it made me curious as to whether this is true on other campuses. According Halkovic and Greene (2015), significant research on the benefits of higher education in a prison setting has been conducted, but less so on previously incarcerated students attending on a college campus. This raises questions as to what factors aid in their transition to college and in their persistence. It would be worth exploring the relationship between enrollment in college and recidivism rates. Also, how well do they integrate with other students and how do those students respond to the knowledge that the person sitting next to them has been incarcerated?

Orientation and Persistence

Since Goodman et al., (2006) and Schlossberg et al., (1989) address the importance of orientation, it would be useful to explore orientation practices on a variety

of campuses and correlate these with first semester success and dropout rates. This would help identify best practices in terms of orientation that is such an important part of the “moving in” phase. This issue could be explored further at a classroom level. How does the instructor’s initial orientation to the course influence course completion and outcomes? It seems important to gain a better understanding of the role orientation plays in student persistence both at the institutional and at the course level.

The 8-Week Advantage and Nontraditional Students

Finally, at the GFCMSU institutional level, it would be useful to do a study of the effectiveness and impact of the 8-week block schedules for all students, but also specifically for nontraditional students because of their historic lower completion rates. This change was made in accordance with best practices and administration often cites the example of the success the University of Montana – Dillon has had with their block scheduling system, however there are significant differences between the two campuses. It would be helpful to know if what was effective on one campus results in similar outcomes for GFCMSU, especially considering that one is a two-year commuter school and the other is a traditional four-year campus.

Implications for Practice

In reviewing the findings from this study, some areas were identified in which GFCMSU might make some improvements. The implications for practice include: evaluating our current student orientation process; expanding advising practices; increasing students’ utilization of the library databases for research purposes; relevance

of the COLS class for nontraditional students, educating faculty regarding financial aid policies; exploring ways in which to make applying for scholarship more seamless.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of New Student Orientation Practices

The issue of orientation was a theme that emerged from participants and from the literature. As mentioned previously, GFCMSU made changes to their new student orientation for the fall 2018 semester, however it would be important to determine whether these new practices were effective. As an institution, we need to continue asking ourselves how we can improve orientation for new and returning students. One change implemented was the three hour “Essential Start” class to better prepare students to use the technology required of them, but it would be important to know if this meets student needs in this area that was identified as a significant challenge by participants in this study. Similarly, when participants raised the issue of orientation within individual classes, it caused me to look at my course orientation practices. Based on my research, I made some changes that hopefully improved students’ understanding of where to find information on D2L as well as expectations for the class. It is easy to assume that faculty know what to do and what students need, but this may not be the case. Perhaps creating a one to two-hour faculty development class on this topic would be useful and would make what students experience more consistent across their classes.

Enhanced Advising

Considering both comments from participants in this study and the research that suggests cost/benefit of going to college is a key factor in the retention of nontraditional

students, it would be helpful for the Advising and Career Center to evaluate their practices related to career advising. Currently according to the GFCMSU website, the Advising Center helps students with the following:

- Selecting courses that match your interests and skills
- Choosing a degree program
- Making a long-term academic plan to meet your goals
- Interpretation of placement test scores
- Short- and long-term academic planning
- Registration procedures and class scheduling
- Transfer information
- Completing an application for graduation
- Academic concerns
- Making referrals to college and community resources
- Withdrawing from classes

Missing from the list is any information related to career decisions or planning. Being able to provide information about careers including such things as amount of education required, demand and salaries would be useful to students in making educational decisions. I recognize advisors' schedules are already full in keeping up with the responsibilities listed above, however even being able to create fact sheets for different careers along with relevant resource links or contacts about the career would be helpful.

Increasing Use of Library Databases

The finding that students use the library for a quiet study area and for access to the computer equipment, but not to conduct research for their classes, is concerning. One of GFCMSU's learning outcomes is technical literacy, which is defined as "The ability to form strategies to locate, evaluate, and apply information, and know the ethical issues surrounding information and technology" (Assessment, n.d., para. 3). If students are not using the library to conduct research, it is doubtful that this outcome is being met. As an

instructor, I have seen this reluctance to use the library to conduct research in my classes and in talking with my colleagues who teach writing, they have encountered the same issue. What Goodman et al., (2006) and Schlossberg et al., (1989) had to say about the importance of orientation suggests that we as educators at the institutional level and in individual classes need to do a better job on orienting students to use of the library. In conducting research on this topic, it seems this issue may be more prevalent on our campus compared to other institutions. Thus, an understanding of why this is occurring is needed and practices need to be implemented that foster strong technical literacy in all classrooms. According Komissarov and Murray (2016) variables that increased library use were instructors' encouragement and classroom visits by library staff. In the past, I have had library staff come to my classes and do presentations on how to conduct research and search for credible sources. Although I did not track this, it did not seem to foster use of the library for research and about a year ago, I stopped having the librarian come to my classes. This suggests that other strategies need to be identified by both instructors and library staff that encourage students to use the campus library for their research.

College Studies (COLS) Class for Nontraditional Students

Similarly, the relevance of the College Studies (COLS) class for nontraditional students should be examined and consideration given to creating a different kind of orientation class that better targets their needs. To determine those needs, perhaps new students could be given some type of needs assessment questionnaire that would determine such things their level of experience and competence with technology, other

related academic areas such as conducting research as well as their hardiness skills could be evaluated, including their coping strategies, social support, nutrition, relaxation and physical activity (Maddi, 2005). It would be useful if the COLS class could be structured with flexible modules so the instructor could pick and choose those areas to address where the class as whole scored the lowest, thereby tailoring the material to a particular cohort of students.

A COLS class tailored to the needs of nontraditional students would also provide them with a place to make connections with their peers. Especially after the theme that emerged regarding the participants attitudes towards traditionally aged students, it seems important to create environments on campus where they can meet other students like themselves. The research shows how important these connections are for nontraditional students.

Considering the desire to mentor that was identified by several participants, it might be possible to create such an opportunity by pairing nontraditional students with traditionally age students within the context of this class. This could be especially useful since research shows that nontraditional students have a greater array of coping strategies that they could share with their traditionally aged peers (Morris, et al., 2003).

Even though instructors do first day icebreaker or regular group activities, whether or not a nontraditional student makes connections may depend on the demographics of the class. For example, in a current Introduction to Psychology class, I have one nontraditional student and the rest are recent high school graduates or dual enrollment students. Thus, the campus needs to look at ways to bring nontraditional

students together so that those all-important connections can be formed. Structuring a COLS class specifically for nontraditional students would accomplish that.

Faculty and Financial Aid Policies

It would be useful to give faculty a brief education on financial aid policies so that they can better understand how their attendance and class policies might potentially affect students and their ability to persist. Without this knowledge, faculty may be unaware of potential consequences to their students, particularly when illness or special circumstances arise that interfere with them getting to class.

Modify the Scholarship Webpage

The final recommendation would be to make scholarship information more transparent. The current page with links to the various scholarships is relatively easy to find on the website, however, in looking at the page, it is hard to know which ones to apply for and a student would have to click on each link to find out. For example, one link says “Cobell Scholarship Opportunities.” Adding a line below the link that says Qualifications: “American Indian or Alaska Native, full-time student, degree seeking” would allow students to quickly determine whether or not they qualify. Because nontraditional students generally have time constraints, this could make finding appropriate scholarship opportunities less time consuming.

Final Thoughts

The literature and completion statistics for nontraditional students can sometimes paint a rather grim portrait of this student population. What struck me the most when I conducted my interviews and analyzed the data was what a determined and resilient group of individuals my participants were and how they persisted despite adversity. Several made tremendous personal sacrifices in order to pursue their educational goals. Sometimes, their personal circumstances may require them to take a semester or a year or even several years off. Research about what colleges can do to better serve their needs has been conducted for years and yet, not that much has changed and many institutions still try to fit these students into their existing traditional educational structure rather than considering how to change the structure to meet their needs. Kasworm (2016) suggests we need to view these students through a different lens.

Perhaps persistence is only part of the concern. Rather, adult student participation needs a different metaphor to characterize episodic involvement: One alternative [to a pipeline continuous enrollment] is the paradigmatic image of an airport. This notion of an airport reflects a different framework defining the new realities of undergraduate access and participation. This image of an airport suggests that higher education is a “terminal” with individuals entering and exiting to accomplish specific educational goals on a discontinuous basis. Thus, rather than a pipeline...higher education participation is now represented in segments across the life span of adulthood and based in learner specific goals and needs (p.71).

As was evidenced in this study, a number of participants had already entered, left and reentered the “terminal” of higher education a several times. Others had left during the study or were anticipating leaving temporarily with plans to re-enroll at some future date and possibly not at GFCMSU. When traditional paradigms such as graduation or transfer are used to measure their success, the statistics are not good. As Kasworm (2016)

recommends, it may important to change how we measure the success whether it be by simply completing a course or a semester or completing a degree or program of study, but without the typical time constraints normally applied when measuring successful oncomes. Based on this research, nontraditional students are a competent, determined group of individuals. As the quote by Kasworm suggests, maybe institutions just need to find a more effective way to measure their success.

By the way, a few weeks ago I ran into IB who disappeared from this study and campus last semester. He is back and determined to try again. When I told him it was good to see that he had returned, he replied, “I needed some time to get my head on straight!”

Chapter Summary

This study explored nontraditional students’ transition to college using the lens of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory and Gender Schema Theory and sought answers to three guiding research questions:

Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college?

Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.

Subquestion 3: What are the postsecondary people, programs, and services experienced as part of the transition to college?

Participants included 22 nontraditional students attending GFCMSU. The initial data analysis confirmed many findings from past research. Their characteristics were

typical of this student population as identified in previous studies. Ten of the 22 were enrolled part-time, 5 worked full-time, 9 worked part-time, 15 were married or lived with a partner and 10 had children under the age of 13. Their reasons for enrollment varied and 12 identified economic reasons as is consistent with previous research, but nine participants enrolled with the goal of seeking a more meaningful career which has not been addressed in the literature.

Regardless of whether they had previously attended college, most participants described the initial transition as stressful with only two labeling it a “fine” and “no problem” and four calling it “interesting. In addition, areas identified in previous research such as adjusting to academic work and balancing competing demands, many found the extensive use of technology challenging. To cope with their transition, a majority of the participants reached out for support either to classmates or through formal campus organization such as the Academic Success Center.

Past research has found that nontraditional students often feel out of place on a college campus because of their age. In this study, this discomfort manifested with some disparaging attitudes towards traditionally aged students. This could create a significant adjustment factor, particularly campuses with a high percentage of traditionally aged students as it would reinforce the notion of not belonging.

Data was then analyzed using constructs from Schlossberg’s Transition Theory which provided further insight into transition issues. During the “moving in” phase, the need for a thorough orientation process was identified, both from a campus perspective and within individual classes as rules and expectations vary by instructor.

During the “moving through” phase, concurrent stressors were addressed along with the importance of adequate coping strategies to deal with these. Some concurrent stressors that were identified were transitioning from the military to civilian life, being released from prison, moving and family separations.

Schlossberg’s concept of self, addresses the psychological resources of the individual and most of these participants had highly functional resources. In particular, exploring their commitment to their education, 16 of 22 were motivated by competence/mastery goals, seven of the 22 by altruism and six by being role models for their families. In terms of their outlook and explanatory styles, only two tended to be more pessimistic and have negative styles and both these students were facing challenges. Overall, the participants demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy demonstrated by their effective time management skills and willingness to seek help. They had numerous characteristics associated with resilience and hardiness including being organized, proactive and flexible. In reviewing their coping strategies, the majority engaged in activities taught in HardiTraining including using effective coping skills, social support, good nutrition, relaxation and physical activities. The two students who struggled also showed deficits in these previously identified areas. Consistent with previous research a majority of the participants identified the importance of a support system both on campus and at home as a key factor in their persistence.

Data was analyzed using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory and the ways in which this theory overlaps with concepts from Schlossberg’s theory was addressed. Self and strategies overlap with Bronfenbrenner’s developmental instigative characteristics of

the individual. How these influenced their interactions with their environment were addressed.

Understanding these developmentally instigative characteristics further provides an understanding of how participants navigate the mesosystem. In this study, most participants were able to navigate the competing demands of their microsystems by enlisting and accepting support from their families or other sources on campus. There psychological resources also allow them to plan for and cope with unexpected events that happen to family members and in turn impact them. The workplace was identified as the other significant microsystem and participants reported environments that were supportive of their schooling. They also didn't hesitate to request schedules conducive to attending school

Research question 3 was addressed on a micro and exosystem level. Overall participants had positive experiences to report on campus. With one exception, the admissions staff was found to be helpful. In few instances, participants didn't feel that the advising staff understood their needs, particularly in the area of career development. Some found orientation and the COLS 103 class useful, others did not. Many found the ASC to be an important resource. An unexpected finding was that the participants only saw the library as a physical place to study or use computer equipment, rather than as a resource for help with course assignments. Participants consistently gave faculty high marks and found them to be supportive which research has found to be a critical factor for persistence. Some concerns were expressed about the lack of availability of evening and weekend classes and this was identified as disadvantage of a small campus.

Factors in the exosystem were discussed such as common course numbering within MUS and articulation agreements with four-year campuses in Great Falls. The role of financial aid, the GI Bill and scholarships as well as the college's academic forgiveness/fresh start program were addressed in terms of the role they play for nontraditional students.

Research question 2 was addressed the context of the macrosystem and surprisingly minimal gender differences emerged. Overall, males were found to be more likely to minimize the challenge of the transition by describing it as "interesting" rather than the more descriptive terms used by all but one female. In analyzing their coping styles, males and females both resorted to problem focused and emotion focused styles. The one unexpected theme that emerged was desire expressed by several of the male participants to serve as mentors to younger students.

A number of areas were identified for future research including: a further examination of nontraditional students' attitudes towards traditionally aged students and the role this plays in their adjustment; whether there is relationship between minimization of the transition to college and persistence; alexithymia and intrinsic motivation, nontraditional males and the desire to mentor; adjustment issues for students with criminal records; whether there is a link between orientation and persistence and specifically for GFMSU, the impact of the new 8-week block schedules on nontraditional students.

There were also several implications for practice including; evaluating the effectiveness of current new student orientation practices; enhanced advising to include

more career information; exploring how to increase the use of library services; creating a COLS class specifically for the needs of nontraditional students and modifying the scholarship webpage.

Finally, what stands out most from this study is what a determined and resilient group of students these participants are, with many making significant personal sacrifices in pursuing their educational goals. They demonstrate strong coping skills, are goal oriented, eager to learn, self-aware and risk takers. This needs to be acknowledged by institutions and more efforts need to be made to address this student population's unique needs.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER



WANTED: PARTICIPANTS FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Are you a nontraditional student (over 25)?

The purpose of this study is to explore your experience transitioning to college as someone who is older than the typical student and has been out of a school environment for at least a year. Elfie Neber, GFCMSU Psychology Faculty and doctoral student at MSU Bozeman is conducting the study. Participation will consist of 3 interviews no more than two hours in length. Interviews will be held at a location of the participant's choosing. **Participants will receive a \$25 gift card in appreciation for partaking in this study.**

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA:

- Over 25 years old
- First year attending GFCMSU
- At least a one year break since attending school elsewhere

INTERESTED?

CONTACT

ELFIE NEBER

OFFICE: 406/771-4325

CELL: 406/750-4804

EMAIL:

NEBERE@GMAIL.COM

OR STOP BY R 247

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**SUBJECT CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN RESEARCH AT MONTANA STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Title of Project: *Nontraditional Students' Transition to College through the Lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Gender Schema Theory.*

Description: You are invited to participate in a research study to explore the transition to college for nontraditional students. This will help us better understand the challenges and issues students face during this process as well as the factors at an institutional level that may help or hinder a successful transition to college.

Time Involvement: You will be asked to participate in three 1-2 hour interviews with the researcher, the anticipated length is 1-2 hours each. With your permission, the sessions will be recorded and will be transcribed after each session. A list of interview questions is attached to this consent form.

Risks and Benefits: Possible risks of participating in this study include emotional discomfort resulting from the discussion of transition process. Possible benefits include a greater recognition of your strengths and coping skills and how these have helped you in your transition to college.

Compensation: You will receive a \$25 gift card for your participation in this research study.

Confidentiality: Any tapes or transcriptions made of the interview shall have no identifying information included with them and shall remain in a locked file in the researcher's office. To protect confidentiality, the participant's name or any identifying information will not be used in the final research report. Should you decline to participate after study has begun, any information already obtained will be destroyed and not be used in the study.

Participant's Rights: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions you may find objectionable, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, by letting the researcher know you would not like to continue any further. Participation or non-participation will not affect your grade or class standing. **If you have any questions or concerns about this research project, you may contact the researcher, Elfie Neber, Psychology Faculty, Great Falls College MSU at elfriede.neber@gfcmsu.edu or 406-771-4325.** If you have additional questions about the rights of human subjects you can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, Mark Quinn, (406) 994-4707 [mquinn@montana.edu].

AUTHORIZATION: I have read the above and understand the discomforts, inconvenience and risk of this study. I, _____ (*name of participant*), agree to participate in this research. I understand that I may later refuse to participate, and that I may

withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Signed: _____

Investigator: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Interview questions</i>	<i>Justification</i>
Overall Research Question: How do nontraditional men and women describe their transition to college?	<p>Q1: How would you describe the experience of becoming a college student?</p> <p>Q2: What experiences have influenced your adjustment to college?</p>	<p>Question one will allow the students to discuss what the experience of becoming a college student has been like for them</p> <p>Question two will help elicit factors that have positively and/or negatively influenced their adjustment based on their perspective. Such open-ended questions will allow the phenomenon of the college transition to emerge. The literature review suggests that nontraditional students have multiple responsibilities and question one and two help elicit how adding the role of college student impacts those roles and provides answers for Schlossberg's "moving in" and "moving through" phase of the transition.</p>
Subquestion 1: How do nontraditional men and women describe personal experiences that have contributed to their transition to college	<p>Q1. What factors contributed to your decision to enroll in college?</p> <p>Q2. What personal experiences influenced your transition to being a student?</p> <p>Q3. What factors have helped you cope with challenges associated with this transition?</p>	<p>Schlossberg's theory looks at the role of self, situation, support and strategies (four "S"s) as key elements of the transition process and identifies three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated or a nonevent.</p> <p>Question one explores aspects of "self" and "situation" as it relates to the decision to enroll in college and will help identify the type of transition event it was for the</p>

		<p>student. Question two will help answer types of support and strategies that have influenced the transition. Question three will allow students to explore specific strategies they have used to adjust to the transition and uncover additional facets of the role of self and their support systems aiding them in the process. The answers from these questions will also be useful in identifying possible gender differences in the transition process.</p>
<p>Subquestion 2: How do these descriptions of personal experiences and postsecondary people, programs and services differ by gender.</p>	<p>No specific interview questions addressing this subquestion will be used. Rather this information will emerge from the data collected from the other interview questions.</p>	<p>The rationale for not including specific questions is that this information will be constructed from the information obtained during the interviews.</p>
<p>Subquestion 3: How do nontraditional men and women describe postsecondary people, programs, and services with respect to the transition to college?</p>	<p>Q1. What role has this institution played in your transition to college?</p> <p>Q2. How have campus resources impacted your transition to college?</p> <p>Q3. How has the educational structure of this campus impacted your transition to college?</p> <p>Q4. How could the campus people, programs and services be more effective in helping nontraditional</p>	<p>A review the literature found that campuses should be sensitive to the unique needs of nontraditional students. These questions have been designed to explore the role of institutional factors in the transition process and identify whether the campus is recognizing the needs of nontraditional students and areas for improvement. Question two has been designed to uncover specific campus resources that have helped or been detrimental to the process. Question three</p>

	students transition to college?	explores how the campus structure affects the transition process. Question four will allow student to identify how the institution could better meet their needs and aid them in their transition process.
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