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## The Experiences of Nontraditional Students at Public Post-Secondary Institutions in Florida- A Qualitative Study

Michael Deneus

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The Experiences of Nontraditional Students at Public Post-Secondary Institutions in  
Florida- A Qualitative Study

by  
Michael Deneus

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education

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## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Michael Deneus under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Michael Deneus  
Name

May 14, 2021  
Date

## **Acknowledgments**

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Now to the little boy that grew up in south Florida, that did not believe he would even graduate from high school to that boy that was barely supported and believed in growing up, YOU DID IT! You took on one of the greatest challenges in your life and

you conquered it, one step at a time and now you are a Doctor. Throughout the process I could hear the late and great Dr. Gay Holiday's words, TRUST THE PROCESS.

## **Abstract**

The Experiences of Undergraduate Nontraditional Students Utilizing Student Services at Post-Secondary Institutions in Florida- A Qualitative Study Michael Deneus 2021: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: nontraditional students student support services, higher education, adult learner.

This phenomenological study was designed to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of nontraditional students who utilized support services at a public post-secondary institution in the State of Florida. From this study, findings identified the specific resources that these participants are using or have used during their time of enrollment, the obstacles and challenges they faced, and some recommendations that could potentially alleviate some issues nontraditional students face at postsecondary institutions. The sample population consisted of six participants, four of which are currently enrolled at a post-secondary institution and the other two graduated from a post-secondary institution within the last five years.

The participants shared their lived experiences related to utilizing support services at their respective institution. A comprehensive account of each case was documented, and the findings highlighted the experiences of these specific nontraditional students and the challenges they are currently facing or have faced while enrolled at a post-secondary institution in Florida. Upon analyzing the data, the researcher began by presenting the superordinate themes discovered in the data by first analyzing the themes as they emerged within and across the cases. The emergent themes were: 1) Academic support; 2) Support challenges; and 3) Access to services

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

In the United States 33% of students enrolled in a college or university undergraduate program are defined as nontraditional (Markle, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines nontraditional students as having at least one of the following characteristics: 25 years old and older, classified as an independent, delayed enrollment into college after completing high school, has a spouse, works full-time, and attends a post-secondary institution at least part-time. According to the NCES (2017), nontraditional student enrollment is projected to continue increasing by 20% through 2025. However, in the state of Florida, the projections of nontraditional student enrollment are set to increase by 5% through 2021 and 7% by 2026 (NCES, 2018).

Similar to any other college student, nontraditional students face their own challenges and roadblocks. Hann and Pendlly (2018) found that many nontraditional students are at a stage in their lives where they have taken on a wide variety of roles such as parenting, full-time employment, and other responsibilities in addition to their education. Nontraditional students that attend institutions with inadequate support are more prone to withdrawing or just leaving school (Grabowski, 2016). According to Sores, Gagliardi and Nellum (2018), four out of five nontraditional students have at least one year of college or more with no degree. In most cases, higher education professionals who are responsible for assisting students on their academic journey, rarely have the necessary skill set or knowledge needed to adequately advise and support nontraditional students, which is a contributing factor to the growing problem (Gonclaves and Trunk, 2014).

## **The Research Problem**

Despite the increase of nontraditional students in the higher education system, public post-secondary institutions are still tailoring student support services for the traditional student population (Hittepole, 2019). The NCES defines the traditional college student as a student that is attending college full-time, seeking an undergraduate degree, enrolled into college right after completing high school and are between the ages of 18-24.

According to the NCES, (2017), nontraditional students are considered the new majority on college and university campuses. Guidry (2018) reports that over 70% of nontraditional students make up the undergraduate student population at post-secondary institutions in the United States. For example, the NCES (2016), reported over 8,000 nontraditional students attended a postsecondary institution. Due to the changing needs of students at various colleges and universities, many institutions have experienced new challenges, while others have created opportunities specific to this population of students.

Several institutions have developed a specialized student service center for nontraditional students. Institutions such as Southern Illinois University (SIU) established an Office of Nontraditional Student Services. The office provides guidance, support, and referrals to on and off-campus resources to assist nontraditional students throughout their academic journey (Mathis, 2017). One of the many initiatives that this department offers is the peer mentoring program. This program was designed to pair each new nontraditional student with a nontraditional student peer mentor as an additional support and resource to provide overall encouragement while enrolled in school. Macdonald (2018) states that nontraditional students prefer to find institutions where programs and

services fit into their current lives, instead of fitting their lives around the institution as traditional students do.

### **Background and Justification**

The Center for Law and Social Policy or CLASP (2015) reported that the nontraditional student population is rapidly growing, and in some areas twice as fast than the common traditional student population, which means institutions need to first understand the needs of nontraditional students to be able to serve them better. Also, institutions must focus on adding different opportunities that contribute to the success of this population, and not focus solely on creating programs, policies, and procedures that favor the traditional college student (Rabourn, Brcka, Lorenz, & Shoup, 2018).

In fact, in an article by Usher and Bryant (2014) they argue that the success of a nontraditional student is not solely on the individual student, it must be a joint effort that includes professors, staff, and the administration as a whole. Furthermore, if the nontraditional student population were to receive the same support that the traditional population receives from the institution, it will allow them to be successful throughout their post-secondary education journey (Bohl, Beatriz & Shrestha (2017).

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

There is limited information in the literature regarding student services and the impact a specialized student service has on the academic and completion rates of nontraditional students at post-secondary institutions. According to Stockwell (2014), institutions receiving federal student aid funds are required to report data on traditional students, first-time degree seekers under 25, and enrolled full-time at a private, public, or non-profit university but, are not required to report any data on nontraditional students,

which will result in limited to no research to highlight any challenges that nontraditional students are facing.

### **Audience**

Campus administrators, faculty, and staff will benefit from these findings by gaining an understating of the needs of nontraditional students and providing services to support those needs. Furthermore, nontraditional students will benefit from these findings to allow them to make an informed decision on an institution that will better support their needs. In addition to the previously mentioned target audience, accrediting agencies will benefit from these findings as it allows assurance that institutions are meeting standards in supporting all students.

### **Setting of the Study**

This study did not take place using a specific setting. Instead, six nontraditional students were interviewed via Zoom. The participants that were involved in the study consisted of four currently enrolled nontraditional students and two nontraditional students that graduated within the last five years who attended a public post-secondary institution in the state of Florida.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher has a total of 10 years of experience working in higher education and currently serves as the Assistant Director of Student Affairs at a regional campus of a non-profit private institution. The researcher has worked with nontraditional students, student organizations, and has overseen department initiatives to better support students, therefore providing him with the necessary skill set to conduct this study. The researcher collected and analyzed all the data. Participants had no relationship, contact, or a conflict

of interest to the researcher that showed an impartial bias on this research study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the needs of nontraditional students who are currently enrolled or have graduated (within the last five years) from a public post-secondary institution in the state of Florida. The findings of this study will provide institutional leaders and student support service staff with research-based recommendations for new programs, policies, and initiatives to support academic success for nontraditional students. Additionally, the results of this study will contribute to the current research on nontraditional students and how to support them, and the understanding of their needs as this population continues to increase.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Nontraditional Student* is the definition for a nontraditional student that is at least 25 years of age or older, enrolled at least part-time in an undergraduate program at a 2-year or 4-year degree-granting institution, (NCES, 2016).

*Traditional College Student* a student that enrolled in college right after high school, attend a postsecondary institution full-time, and under the age of 25 years old (NCES, 2016).

*Student Services* departments or divisions created to support student success at postsecondary institutions, to improve development and growth (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2012).

*Postsecondary Institution* a formal program designed primarily for students beyond the 'compulsory' high school age (NCES, 2016).

*Inter-role Conflict* a form of role conflict, occurs when individuals are juggling

multiple roles that require expectations (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999).

*Social Isolation* the absence of social interaction, relationships, or contacts with other people (Berg & Cassells, 1992).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Current research on nontraditional students yields several results focusing on persistence, reasons for returning to college, and campus personnel's attitudes toward nontraditional students. NCES, (2015) defines nontraditional students as students who delayed enrollment for one year or more after high school; work full time while enrolled or reported to be at the age of 25 or higher.

A recent report published by NCES, (2019) indicated that nontraditional students made up 8% of full-time undergraduate students in the public, private and not-for-profit sector of post-secondary institutions. While at private for-profit, four-year institutions, nontraditional students made up over 38% of the student population, making it the largest age group enrolled in fall 2017. Additionally, 22% of students enrolled part-time in a two-year, public institution were nontraditional students, 34% in private not-for-profit, and 38% in private for-profit institutions.

As the enrollment of nontraditional students increase, it is critical that institutions understand the needs of this population (Pfordresher, 2016). In the early 1970s, Martin (1972) defined the term "nontraditional" as a wide variety of coordinated learning activities that occur outside of conventional or traditional educational offerings. According to Quay (1981), Katherine Patricia Cross, a scholar of educational research, was the first person to coin the term nontraditional student back in the 1970s. Throughout Cross's career, she has researched adult education and higher learning, while advocating pedagogy and methodology as it relates to the advancement and remediation of the university system.



NCES, (2018) reported that if you look at any public, private, for-profit, or not-for-profit postsecondary institution, the face of the majority in the classrooms are nontraditional students. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) (2015), In 2015-16 academic school year, 35% of all students in the United States enrolled in a post-secondary institution, were classified as a nontraditional student. Ignoring the nontraditional student population has kept post-secondary institutions blind to the special needs and characteristics of these students, and the lack of specialized support services will continue to hinder their success (Johnson, 2019; Hittepole, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework serves as a guide between the data collection procedures. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will be utilizing Tinto's (1993) views of student attrition. Tinto's (1993) viewpoint mentions that a lack of involvement in connection to the institution and engagement contributes to the departure from the institution. Due to this nature, the correlation between involvement and engagement provides a framework to examine the experiences of nontraditional students who utilize or have utilized support services at their respective institution. As the result of the current position nontraditional students are in their lives, they are the most challenged population of students due to possible outside obligations such as, working fulltime, caring for loved ones, children, and other challenges that they must devote time to.

### **History of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education**

The government feared that its citizens did not have the educational capacity to uphold the virtues of the United States of America (Reese, 2011). In the early 1800s, a United States representative and educator by the name of Horace Mann and others

created and passed legislation to provide funding and resources to entice citizens to enroll in colleges (Ogren, 2005). Institutions called "normal schools" were first opened in 1893 to serve adults who enrolled part-time, worked during the day, had a family, or classified in a lower socioeconomic class (Ogren, 2003). In the early 1900s, the name normal school was dropped, and teachers' colleges were created to enroll and produce high-quality teachers. In addition, the name was also dropped in the 1960s in order to join the state college system (Dunham, 1969; Ogren, 2005; Selingo, 2000).

In the 1940s, an increase in enrollment of nontraditional students came after World War II. Funds were made available through the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the GI Bill. Due to the GI Bill, colleges and universities received an overwhelming number of enrollees from both men and women. The men who were returning from war wanted to use their benefits to have an educational foundation, and the women who stabilized the workforce while the men were off at war, also had the want for education as well as the ambition to improve their skills (Chance, 2017). As national policies and practices evolved, the United States created space for nontraditional students to enroll in higher education institutions (Remenick, 2019). In the early 1970s, there were an estimated 50% of nontraditional students in colleges and universities across the United States (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. xi). Furthermore, Fairchild (2003) pointed out that all theories and research surrounding student development in higher education institutions, always excluded nontraditional students. Remenick, (2019) argues that the rise of federal financial aid and the creation of online learning, as the two instances that led to high enrollment from nontraditional students.

### **Rise of Federal Financial Aid and Nontraditional Students**

In President Truman's report on higher education, he noted and deemed that education was for everyone (Trivett, 1973). Although President Truman said education is for everyone, citizens did not have the financial resources to pursue a college degree. This resource came in 1965, during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential term where he signed the Higher Education Act of 1965 into law. The Higher Education Act program included federally funded grants that assisted students with the financial means to go to school. The Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (now known as the Pell Grant) was the first federally funded grant program created in the United States (Baum, 2015; Remenick, 2019).

Kane and Rouse, (1999) reported that enrollment for part-time students at community colleges increased over 220% between 1970 and 1995 due to the Pell Grant. By 2014, the percentages rose to just over 86% (Baum, 2015). Based on the raw data, the Pell Grant immensely served adult students, many who only wanted to gain skills in a specific training or trade in a short amount of time. The creation of financial aid assisted many nontraditional students with going back to school and getting a college education.

Despite a wide variety of state and federally funded programs that were created to support all students in post-secondary institutions, these programs generally favored the traditional student population and oftentimes are not accessible to nontraditional students (Taliaferro & Benefield, 2016). In a recent study on the effects of financial aid on college success of two-year nontraditional students, the research found that nontraditional students were more likely to withdraw during their third year of an associate degree program if they did not receive financial aid (Chen & Hossler 2017).

In a different study on the obstacles for the nontraditional student population, the research found that the financial aid office does not address the needs of this specific population of students. For example, the office does not answer phone calls during the day, does not respond to emails unless the student threatens to leave the university and the office provides vague details on how funding works (Gonclaves et al,2014). These challenges can leave nontraditional students with zero guidance to succeed as some rely on financial aid to finish their studies.

### **Creation of Online Learning and Nontraditional Students**

Some may not realize, but online education has been around since the 1800s with the telephone, telegraph, and snail-mail (Remenick, 2019). However, with the creation of the internet, online learning took on new levels. Higher education institutions used online learning to attract nontraditional students by offering a way for students to get an education and attend classes without physically being on campus (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This was ideal for individuals that could not afford to go to a campus and sit in a classroom for two or more hours (i.e., full-time working professionals, stay at home parents, etc.).

Online education for many colleges and universities is still critical to their success. Over 60% of higher education institutions reported that having an online learning environment is crucial to their long-term strategy (Hixon, Barczyk, Berg, and Buckenmeyer, 2016). Seaman, Allen, and Seaman (2018) reported that in 2016, over 30% of students enrolled in college took at least one online course. It was also reported that while tracking online education in the United States, over 40% of the 2,800 college and university academic leaders believed that retaining online students is more of a

concern than the retention of students that take take-to-face courses (Allen et al, 2015).

The appeal of online learning for nontraditional students stems from being free from a traditional in-class model, it creates the opportunity for self-paced learning, and is in some ways cost-effective (Gatta, 2003). This allows nontraditional students the means to continue with their day-to-day responsibilities and attend classes after those responsibilities are completed.

In a recent survey on perception, attitudes, and preferences of adult learners in higher education, Stevens (2014) discovered that 67% of nontraditional students strongly agreed that online courses are convenient and impactful. In addition, the availability of technology to nontraditional students provides the means for this population of students to continue formal education or vocational training. Nontraditional students will continue to use the online learning platform to gain their education as they continue to enroll into post-secondary institutions. As long as there are nontraditional students, online learning will continue to hold a great appeal due to its flexibility, easy access, and convenience (Croxtton, 2014).

Major (2015) reports that collegial interactions with professors, staff, or other students can be difficult to attain for the nontraditional student population. The environment is different from a traditional classroom where everyone is paying attention and on their own. However, nontraditional students must consider the multitude of competing factors when taking courses that may not be a conducive learning environment. Chance (2017) reported that nontraditional students have technology issues, lack of interaction with professors, and complications with course content while taking online courses.

## **Types of Post-Secondary Institutions**

The first colleges and universities were discovered on the principles of liberal arts as a fundamental discipline for the preparation of judgment and character. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the significance of the sciences and engineering were brought up due to their significance with applied work (Geiger, 2015). According to a 2015 enrollment report, nontraditional students make up 14% of the community college populations, 10% in public four-year colleges, 8% in private four-year colleges, 2% in four-year programs at for-profit institutions and 1% enrolled in courses for one year or less at for-profit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### ***Community/junior colleges***

The evolution of community colleges began between 1907 and 1920. The community college structure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed into a nationwide system comprising of more than 400 community colleges (Nevarez and Wood, 2010). In addition to enrollment, community colleges have grown tremendously. In a survey conducted by Dougherty, Lahr, and Morest, (2017) it was reported that in Fall 2015, over 5 million students enrolled in community colleges around the world. Community colleges saw an enrollment increase of over 2.5% each year, doubling the enrollment rates every 26 years (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016).

The mission and purpose of community colleges are to be a mass-access type of institution, open to the entire community. Therefore, they offer a large variety of credentials, programs, and lower tuition costs (Dougherty, Lahr & Morest, 2017). Mintz (2019) states that community colleges are responsible for, technical and vocational training, human capital formation, work-force development, and local and regional

economic development. This gives them a reason to support the students that decide to enroll, especially the nontraditional student population being the highest enrolled.

### *Nontraditional Students in the Community College System*

In the early 1980s, the average age for a college student at a community college was 27, in the mid-1980s it rose to 29 and by the early 1990s, it was 31 (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The community college system has played a crucial part in today's higher education system as it relates to nontraditional students (Ma & Baum, 2016). In a 2014 survey conducted by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), it was reported that over 2 million full-time and just over 3.5 million part-time non-traditional students were enrolled in a community college. Additionally, nontraditional students choose community colleges not only for a better career path but because of the community college's admissions policy, close proximity to their home, and the important pathway towards secondary education (McGraw, 2018).

Historically, community colleges enroll a large number of nontraditional students each year. (Van Noy, Heidkamp, & Kaltz, 2014), state that this population of students want to gain skills in a short amount of time, go right into the workforce, and do not want to enroll in a bachelor's program that can take up to five years to complete. Community colleges have a rich history of providing support to nontraditional students, this population includes low-income, minority and first-generation students with the average age being 29 years old (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015).

Additionally, with a wide variety of different paths for nontraditional students, such as acquiring a new skill set for a current or new job, to obtain a degree to transfer, or to get a refresher on old skills, community colleges are available for non-traditional students for

almost anything they seek when it comes to postsecondary education.

### ***Four-Year Public Institutions***

There are over 3,000 four-year colleges in the United States, with 710 being public institutions (NCES, 2017). These institutions are made up of undergraduate and graduate students pursuing a bachelor, master, or doctorate degree or certification. Four-year colleges are considered to be the most common higher education institution in the United States (Perkins, 2019). The terms college and university have changed and are used to describe today's post-secondary institutions that offer a minimum of a two-year degree program. Today, the terms college and university are used interchangeably, where the two are understood to mean institutions at the postsecondary level. In different circumstances, university usually means a large institution that offers graduate and doctorate programs, while college means undergraduate or associate degree programs (Academic Credentials Evaluations Inc, 2020).

In a survey conducted by the NCES, (2015), undergraduate enrollment in four-year colleges is just over 64% or 10 million students. These institutions aim to have a broad and wider range of didactic programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels (NCES, 2019b). Some four-year institutions have a strong research focus while others place more emphasis on liberal arts. Owned and operated by the state's board of education; four-year institutions are funded by local, state, and federal taxes. They also receive funding through student services fees, tuition, and in some cases private donors (Perkins, 2019).

Based on a survey conducted by the NCES, (2019) on enrollment, it has been reported that between 2000 and 2017, public institutions dominated the enrollment rates



of students in higher education. Also, public colleges and universities made up just fewer than 40% of all students in higher education. When looking at these public colleges and universities, we must understand that they are also apart of statewide multi-campus systems. In these systems, there are specific guidelines and oversight that bridges the gaps between the campus, local state, and government (Eckel & King, 2000). For example, the 13 institutions that are a part of the Texas State University system, centralize different support such as legal counsel, auditing, academic programming, and contracting (Texas State University System, 2020)

### ***Nontraditional Students in Four-Year Public Institutions***

In the past decade, higher education leaders have reported that nontraditional student enrollment has increased significantly (Luke & Justice, 2016). The NCES, (2019) reported that the full-time enrollment for nontraditional students at a four-year public institution were fewer than 10% in the Fall of 2017, while the part-time percentage was just over 25%.

The motivation of a nontraditional student's desire to become more marketable and competitive is at the forefront (Luke & Justice, 2016). Advanced education is essential to improving opportunities to increase the chances of professional advancement and a change in socioeconomic status. Despite the large and continuing enrollment numbers of nontraditional students, it has been reported that 60% of the buildings constructed and completed on college campuses between 2014-2015, supported the traditional student population (Chen, 2017). Despite all the relative information presented, there has not been a lot of research done in this area. A study conducted by Irvand and Kevan (2017), reported that there are insufficient quantities of research and

data on nontraditional students at four-year institutions. They also reported that the research that has been conducted only refers to descriptive analysis in different policy reports.

### ***For-Profit Institutions***

For-Profit Higher Education Institutions (FPHEIs) have existed in some form for over 250 years (Hodgeman, 2018). The first for-profit institution to use the term “college” was Barlett’s Commercial College, which opened in 1834 by R. Montgomery Barlett (Hodgeman, 2018). Between the mid-1800s and early 1900s, for-profit institutions had a hold on business education and rose from 20 colleges in the mid-1800s to over 200 colleges with over 80,00 students in 1890 (Kinser, 2006). During the colonial era in the United States, FPHEIs were considered to be the only way for marginalized and nontraditional students who decided to choose a career-oriented education rather than a liberal arts or general college education (Hodgeman, 2018).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, FPHEIs, provided access to education to Native Americans, African Americans, women, the blind, deaf, and students who did not choose the traditional education route. (Geiger, 2000; Kinser, 2006 & Ruch, 2001). Currently, the for-profit higher education sector has the largest schools by enrollment in the United States. For example, the National Student Clearing House’s Research Center (2018) surveyed the Fall 2018 enrollment on all two and four-year public, private for-profit, and not-for-profit institutions, and it reported that over 16,000 nontraditional students enrolled in FPHEIs during the 2018-2019 academic term.

### ***Nontraditional Students in For-Profit Institutions***

FPHEIs are attractive to nontraditional students because of the convenience they

offer when working with the schedules of this population of students. These types of institutions also offer different ways for nontraditional students to access what they need to succeed. FPHEIs have reformed higher education by catering specifically to nontraditional students, and using technology (i.e., virtual classes and online access to resources) to meet the needs of nontraditional students (Hodgman, 2018). In a 2016 survey on enrollment, conducted by the NCES, it was established that over 60% of nontraditional students enrolled in a for-profit institution's online programs (NCES, 2017). For-profit Institutions FPHEIs continue to thrive due to the constant shifts within the economy that are driving nontraditional students back to seeking more education.

The nontraditional student population is constantly wanting/needing to be retrained to advance in their current career path or start a new career, which has opened a gap for demands, where for-profit institutions are ready to fill. Cottom, (2017) pointed out four economic shifts that for-profit institutions were able to fill the gap for nontraditional students. The first is employees frequently change jobs which have led to employers shifting to rely more on temporary workers and contracted positions. The second is fewer employees want to grow with a company. The third is that employees are being held responsible for health insurance and retirement. Lastly, employees are also being held responsible for professional development. As long as for-profit institutions continue to cater to the needs of nontraditional students (i.e., flexible class schedule, virtual classrooms, and providing quick options to graduate), they will continue to be an option for this population of students.

### **Concerns With Current Support Services on College Campuses**

Colleges and universities have a wide variety of support services in place for all

students to take advantage of. They include but are not limited to services such as orientation, academic advising, admission, financial aid, tutoring services, counseling services, and student affairs (Rudge, 2014). These functions assist with overall retention, personal growth, early warning alerts, and financial counseling (Hodge, 2017). Essentially, these offices were created for students as resources to successfully guide them through their college experience. In a study by Gonclaves (2014), research showed that higher education institutions could be doing so much more to improve services and activities for nontraditional students. The improvement of services and activities could lead to an increase in participation, engagement, and the improvement of academics amongst this population of students.

The lack of student services and other resources for nontraditional students serve as an obstacle that can hinder their success during their academic career. The current student services that are on college campuses were designed and created for a type of student that attended college over 50 years ago (Lerner & Sanford, 2019). The diversity of the nontraditional student population advocates that they need different resources than the traditional student population to succeed during their time in a postsecondary institution (Sulzen, 2017). In a survey regarding the perceptions, attitudes, and preferences of nontraditional students (Stevens, 2014), the research found that despite receiving assurance from institutional representatives that challenges would be addressed, 73% of nontraditional students believed that the systems at their institutions were not built to address their unique needs. Even though most institutions do not have updated services and resources to support nontraditional students, there are a few higher education institutions that serve as models due to the type of specialized support services for

nontraditional students.

The Counseling Center at the University of South Florida has a specific page that not only defines what a nontraditional student is but gives some indicators on what nontraditional students can be struggling with. Such as, not finding specific services to cater to their needs, trouble balancing all responsibilities or feeling like they are the oldest on-campus. This office understands that the struggles that nontraditional students go through, and they are distinct, so having a service/space that allows them to process and understand what they are feeling, is essential for their success.

Eastern Florida State College established the Office of Accelerated Education to oversee the Life-Experience Acceleration Path (LEAP) program. This program allows nontraditional students to accelerate their education by using either college/university credits they have received or through any work experience, military training, industry certifications, self-study, and/or volunteer activities. Hayward and Willams, (2014) mentions that nontraditional students who received credit from prior learning experiences show a better academic outcome, compared to the students who did not receive prior learning credit from their institution.

Seminole State College of Florida established Student Success Specialists. These specialists are designated to specifically serve and support nontraditional students. These individuals were purposely cross trained in advising, financial aid, and admissions to better serve nontraditional students. Instead of having students bounce around to different offices and people, nontraditional students have a one stop shop to their needs met with a specific point of contact. Furthermore, all institutions must understand that supporting nontraditional students is essential to their academics. These model institutions are just a

few that are ensuring they support this unique and growing population of students.

### **Needs of Nontraditional Students**

Nontraditional student's educational needs are unique and at times require specific attention from post-secondary institutions (Owusu-Agyeman, Fourie-Malherbe, & Frick, 2018), as their needs differ from traditional students. The National Orientation Directors Association (2017) states that when it comes to success in school, the needs of nontraditional students are significantly different from the traditional population of students. In 2006, institutions started noticing the changes of the collegiate population from the typical traditional college student to the nontraditional student (Anderson 2016). Typically, nontraditional students are older and balancing more than just school. These students have jobs, families, and other personal obligations they can be facing (Bidwell, 2014). Creating a balance between all nontraditional student's academic and external commitments, allows them to reach a high-level of engagement that is sufficient enough for them to reach and achieve a high level of academic success (Cote & Furlong, 2016).

As the population of nontraditional students increase, a large demand for specific services and facilities for nontraditional become prevalent. The experience, support, and extracurricular opportunities should be distinct and tailored for nontraditional students (Rascoff, 2016). For example, the University of North Carolina, Charlotte noticed that they have a large number of nontraditional students that may not have access to digital textbooks, so they designed a specific library service for nontraditional students where they can have books mailed to them. Once the student is done, they can simply send the book back with the return label that was initially sent to them. In addition to this service, they have access to librarians 24 hours a day.

Hittepole (2019) states, for institutions to better address the needs of nontraditional students, a combination of both support and academic support services must be at the forefront to tackle their unique needs. A study at a university in Scotland on the engagement of nontraditional students and their intentions to persist revealed that nontraditional students did not understand the concepts of student engagement (Trowler, 2015). Furthermore, nontraditional students continue to experience obstacles as a result of policies and procedures catering to the traditional student population (Daiva, 2017).

### **Obstacles Impeding the Success of Nontraditional Students**

As the nontraditional student population continues to increase inside higher education institutions, so do distinct barriers to success (Rabourn, Shoup & BrckaLorenz, 2015). The American Council for Education (2019) reported that the main focus of campus leaders for the next five years were facilities, maintenance, workforce costs, financial aid, and tuition discounting, so institutions are not even thinking about nontraditional students. Even before and during enrollment, nontraditional students already have barriers related to finances, time constraints, and professional and personal responsibilities (Gordan, 2014; & Pragg, 2015). Brinthaup and Eady (2014) pointed out that the qualities of nontraditional students are not being supported or met by faculty members in the classroom. Moreover, these professors have failed to provide any type of accommodations for this population of students.

The process of understanding nontraditional students and creating services that support them must start with understanding who they are, what they care about, and what obstacles they face. In the absence of support from institutions, nontraditional students might be forced to withdraw from their institution. If they chose not to withdraw, they

may not fully assimilate into the campus culture. Lastly, they may not have the means or knowledge to receive or access any form of support (Gordon, 2014). This population of students will require support that does not look like the traditional method that institutions are providing. Understanding that the one size fits all model of supporting students will not work. Hittepole (2019) discusses that inter-role conflict, social isolation, lack of academic flexibility and persistence and completion are the obstacles that stand in the way of success for nontraditional students.

### ***Inter-role Conflict***

Nontraditional students are entering higher education institutions with multiple roles and responsibilities before adding the role of a student into the equation (Marsman, 2014). In addition to the role of being a student, they may have responsibilities as a parent, employee, caregiver as well as other roles that are competing for their attention (Hittepole, 2019).

According to the American Psychological Association of Psychology, inter-role conflict occurs when someone has various roles and high expectations and behaviors associated with said roles. The transition into a university or college can be difficult. However, when there are different responsibilities added, difficulties can cause a bit of chaos (Quiggins, Ulmer, Hainline, Burris, Ritz, & Van Dusen. 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reports that it takes 4.5 years to complete a bachelor's degree, which is based on full-time enrollment. However, with a substantial number of commitments outside of being a student, nontraditional students sometimes do not have the option of attending school as a full-time student (Grabowski, 2016).

The demand and attention from competing life roles and responsibilities continue



to affect the nontraditional student's role of being a student. The NCES (2015) provided a report that listed 23% of nontraditional students is a parent or has one dependent. Also, the American Association of Community Colleges (2015) found that over 16% of nontraditional students enrolled at a community college are single parents. Although nontraditional students may try to make light of their roles outside of the classroom and their scheduling conflicts, these demands may act as a barrier to their role as a student. Their success in their program and ultimately their degree completion may be hindered (McGraw, 2018).

A study by Rhijn (2014) discussing barriers, enablers, and strategies for success by undergraduate student parents, explored the experiences of student parents' pursuing a post-secondary education. The study highlighted that students had to make sacrifices that are generally school-related (i.e., skipping class, not studying) in an attempt to balance other matters in their life. Also, students would have a hard time selecting courses that interfered with family time or childcare, which made it difficult to be available to take courses.

### ***Social Isolation***

There are many instances where nontraditional students find it difficult when it comes to connecting with the traditional student population, therefore lacking a sense of belonging (Gonclaves et al., 2014). Nontraditional students are prone to specific challenges that can convey as social isolation (Mallman & Lee, 2017). Given the age difference of nontraditional students and traditional students, nontraditional students reported that they experience social isolation within the university community (Hittepole, 2019). A study by the American College Health Association (ACHA), (2017) reported

that out of 48,000 college students, over 60% reported feeling “extremely lonely”. An additional study conducted by Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, and King (2015) reported that nontraditional students did not feel connected to their university during their first year enrolled. It was also reported that nontraditional students felt inadequate through peer-to-peer relationships and did not have the opportunities to participate in campus life events. Furthermore, being connected to the university is not just in the classroom, institutions must create opportunities that will allow nontraditional students to be involved to create social connections with other students on campus.

Higher education institutions were designed to create opportunities and facilitate the construction of relationships among the diverse student population on campuses (Hittepole, 2019). Mallman and Lee, (2017) argue that the experiences of social isolation for nontraditional students not only present a significant barrier for full participation, but it impacts their identities as students as they transition into their institution and completion of their studies. A study by Pfordresher (2016) on the persistence factors for nontraditional undergraduate students at a northeast catholic college, explained that over 50% of nontraditional students reported issues with the communication of social events. The study also reported that nontraditional students felt that student programming were unrelated to them and the timing of events were not ideal for their schedules. Lastly, the study reported that nontraditional students felt unwelcomed due to institutional barriers that caused them not to engage socially, which led to social isolation.

### ***Lack of Academic Flexibility***

Jonker, Marz, and Voogt, (2020) defines curriculum/academic flexibility as adjusting the access of course curriculums to the needs and capabilities of the students.

Gonclaves et al (2014) stated that faculty and staff that are in place to support nontraditional students on their academic journey, seldom have the skillset or knowledge to provide adequate support to assist them. In a recent study regarding faculty perceptions of teaching nontraditional college students, it was discovered that faculty members felt that as the classroom dynamics have changed. Additionally, they reported that nontraditional students generate challenges in the classroom that can lead to an increase in conflicts and classroom management (Spedding, 2016).

Traditional courses that mostly meet during the morning and afternoon do not provide accommodations for the lifestyles of nontraditional students (Grabowski, 2016). Also, the constant focus on the traditional population of students significantly lowers learning success as well as academic entry. The services that are available to nontraditional students are either below par or nonexistent on most college and university campuses (Chen, 2017).

### ***Persistence and Completion***

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) describes *persistence* as an action of a continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition. The NCES (2016) reported that as of 2015, 91% of adults in the United States have a high school diploma. However, over 50% completed some college. Nontraditional students face challenging obstacles that can prevent them from obtaining their degrees (Hittepole, 2019). The goal for any nontraditional student enrolled in a college or university, is to get a degree and either move up in their current field or enter another sector to provide a better life for themselves and sometimes a spouse, child, or someone under their care.

In a study conducted by Markle (2015) regarding the factors influencing

persistence among nontraditional university students, the research found that nontraditional students do recognize the challenges that are impeding their success. The researcher asked what factors most influence the decision of nontraditional students to continue or drop out of their institutions. Male participants replied that funding was a concern for them as well as showing a distinct conflict between being gainfully employed and their education. Female participants mentioned the demanding needs of different roles concerned them, showing the challenges of inter-role conflict.

In a 2015 study, Juszkievicz (2015) reported that in the last 3 years the enrollment of nontraditional community college students decreased tremendously. The study also found that 70% of nontraditional students were enrolled part-time and over 40% of nontraditional students that started, never finished. Lastly, data over a 6-year period showed that nontraditional students who started at a community college, 45% withdrew or dropped out (leaving just over 30% completing their degree), 12% still currently enrolled and roughly 4% enrolling into a 4-year institution to complete their degree, with the completion rates of nontraditional students being much lower than traditional students, understanding why they are not completing their degrees and just dropping out or withdrawing, affects all levels of the higher education system.

Institutions can speak about the need for higher retention rates and constant enrollment, but if they are not looking at ways to reach this population of students, they will continue to see a high percentage of dropouts and withdrawals.

The United States is generally seen as a land of opportunity, and within that opportunity is education. The current education system, however, is filled with a large number of concerns. These concerns can range from the cost of getting a college degree

as well as educational preparedness or the foundation required to succeed in the classroom. An additional concern is having the ability to push through all personal challenges while still being a successful student. All these areas can be seen as significant roadblocks to success in college (Runnberg-Valadez, 2017).

Nontraditional students are going against the grain and social norms by deciding to return to school all while post-secondary institutions continue to build and design their institution to support and facilitate success for traditional students. Nontraditional students face obstacles that can sometimes cause rapid withdrawal from institutions (Hutchens 2016). As nontraditional students matriculate through these institutions, the absence of support at the post-secondary level can certainly have a serious impact on their learning, development, and success. If this culture continues, nontraditional students will not feel welcomed at a place that is supposed to help them succeed. If this culture continues, nontraditional students will not feel welcomed at a place that is supposed to help them succeed.

### **Research Questions**

1. What support services during their enrollment do nontraditional college students need from their institution?
2. What obstacles or barriers do nontraditional college students experience at their institution?
  - 2a. What obstacles or barriers did nontraditional students who graduated from a Florida post-secondary institution experience at their institutions?
3. What specific academic and support services would nontraditional undergraduate students like to see implemented to help support their academic success?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Aim of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of nontraditional students who utilize support services at a public post-secondary institution in Florida. This study provides institutional leaders and student support services staff with research-based recommendations for new programs, policies, and initiatives to support academic success for nontraditional students. Furthermore, this is an opportunity to contribute to the current research on nontraditional students and how to support and understand their needs as this population continues to increase.

### **Qualitative Research Approach**

Creswell and Poth (2018) mention that there are five commonly used qualitative research designs which are phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, and case study. A phenomenological case study was used for this study because it allowed the researcher to understand the essence of the experiences provided by the participants. Additionally, a phenomenological study outlines a prevalent connotation between the participants in the study and their lived experiences to a specific phenomenon (Creswell et al., 2018).

The first concept of phenomenology was created by Edmond Husserl in 1931 to gain a better understanding of the “lived experiences” of research participants and the meaning of the experiences they have been through (Alase, 2017). Phenomenological studies allow for data analysis that can follow a specific systematic procedure that moves from narrow analysis to broader units, than to a detailed experience, that summarizes what the participant experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, using a

phenomenological approach allows the researcher to utilize empirical data to investigate a phenomenon that will yield various responses from participants of the same event. However, the researcher should be asking a series of different questions to conclude the true meaning of the experience (Dukes, 1984).

The phenomenon for this specific research was to investigate the experiences of nontraditional students who currently attends a public post-secondary institution in the state of Florida and nontraditional students who have graduated (within the last five years) from a Florida public institution. Phenomenology is the best approach for this study because the researcher was interested in the experiences of currently enrolled nontraditional students and nontraditional students that graduated from a post-secondary institution, utilizing student support services during their time at a Florida public institution. Creswell and Creswell (2018. P 13), state that the researchers using this approach will describe the lived experiences about the phenomenon at hand as described by the participants.

### **Participants**

The sample size for this study consisted of six participants that are classified as a nontraditional student who met the following characteristics outlined by the National Center for Education Statistics- All participants were at least 25 years old or older, classified as an independent, delayed enrollment into college after completing high school, had a spouse, worked full-time, and attended a postsecondary institution at least part-time. Four of the participants are currently enrolled at a postsecondary institution and the other two graduated within the last five years.

The sampling strategy for this study was purposeful sampling to identify select

participants for the interview portion of the study. This specific criterion sampling tends to work better since all the participants have experienced the same phenomenon that is currently being studied (Creswell et al., 2016).

Participants were recruited using a social media private webpage that allows individuals that sign up for free profiles to not only upload photos, music, articles, and their own opinions and thoughts, but to connect with friends, family, colleagues and in some cases individuals they have never met. The researcher utilized a private webpage to advertise the study which included the purpose of the study, confidentiality agreement, interview process and risks of the study.

### **Data Collection and Instruments**

After approval from Nova Southeastern University's IRB was received a prescreening survey (Appendix C) was distributed, to ensure all participants met the qualifications of the study, then moved on to the interviews. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom. The researcher asked open-ended questions to gain an understanding of the experiences of each nontraditional student participant that utilized student support services at their respective campus.

After receiving authorization to use a modified version of the Student Interview Guide (Appendix A) developed by (Bannister, 2009) for the current study. The Student Interview Guide was originally used and administered by (Bannister, 2009) to explore the experiences of undergraduate nontraditional students in relation to student support services. The modified version of the instrument was used to investigate the needs of nontraditional students who both currently attend a public institution and nontraditional students who graduated (within the last five years).



## Procedures

The study began after receiving approval from IRB at Nova Southeastern University. After approval was received, advertising of the study on a private social media webpage began with the purpose of recruiting participants. The recruitment time for this study remained open for six weeks to allow individuals to participate and, the opportunity for the researcher to gain as many participants as possible. The interested participants were directed to a pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix C) to determine their eligibility for the study. Once eligibility was reviewed and approved, the participants who agreed to move forward to the interview portion of the study, received an email on the next steps of the study, which included an email of the purpose, risks, qualifications, and a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B) that required a printed name, signature, and date.

After the participants consented to being recorded using Zoom, (a video conferencing platform), they signed the informed consent form (Appendix B), which indicated that the participant could withdraw from the study at any time before or during the interview. Once the consent form was signed and emailed back to the researcher, the researcher sent an email to the participant to schedule a date and time to conduct the 60-minute web-based video interview. Once the dates and times of the interview were confirmed with the participant, a calendar invite was sent to remind and solidify the date. On the day of the interview, the purpose of the interview was reiterated, a thorough discussion of the confidentiality agreement was conducted, and each participant was asked if he/she would like to continue, which all the participants chose to continue.

The purpose of this interview protocol was to ask questions that were meant to allow the participants to think, describe and articulate their experiences utilizing student support services at their respective institution. This data collection process took place during one full 60-minute interview with each participant.

Lastly, the researcher allowed for member checking. Each participant received a copy of the transcript from their interview to review and verify what was said and the opportunity to make changes, if necessary. Each participant was given one week to review and agree to what was transcribed from the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The steps of IPA were used to analyze the data of the study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants experiences with student support services at their institution. This study used this approach to focus on analyzing how the participants made meaning of their life experiences. A specific, detailed, and personal account followed by the presentation and discussion of the generic experiential themes is usually paired with the researcher's interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### **Transcription and Coding**

The researcher used the six steps described by Smith et al to collect data from each interview to uncover the patterns, and an analysis for similarities and differences as it related to this specific phenomenon being researched. The first step was used to analyze the data, the second step was used to transform the initial notes into themes, third step was used to look and find emerging themes, the fourth step was used to discover and generate emerging themes, then moved the recordings and notes to organize the ideas that emerged and lastly, construct a final statement outlining the meanings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher used the Facebook social media platform to get participants. Once the participants were selected, the researcher provided a consent form (Appendix B) that asked the participants to review, sign, and submit to the researcher. Additionally, the consent form allowed the participants to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty, the researcher used pseudonyms to protect the identity of all participants. Only the researcher has access to all data materials, which has been placed in a password-protected flash drive and will be destroyed after three years.

Due to the confidentiality purposes and ethical considerations, the researcher replaced the names of the participants and the institutions they currently attend or have attended with pseudonyms. This was to ensure that there were no repercussions to the participants and institutional privacy for the university or college represented in the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

The researcher established trustworthiness through member checking. Yin (2014) states that member checking is a way to review a draft study and returning it to the participant to corroborate what was said during the initial data collection. When conducting a qualitative research study, member checking is an important part of the research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking took place between the researcher and participants after the interview. The researcher transcribed the recordings of each interview and provided a copy of the transcript to the participants to check for accuracy and validity.

**Potential Research Bias**

The investigator of this study served as the interviewer of the participants. The investigator currently holds the position of Assistant Director of Student Affairs at a four-year private not-for-profit university. The purpose of the researcher's role is to provide programming and support to nontraditional undergraduate students. The researcher currently holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in college student affairs with a specialization in conflict resolution and analysis. Lastly, there were no power issues or dynamics that happened during this research study.

**Limitations**

The focus of this dissertation was to investigate the experiences of nontraditional students who currently attend or have graduated (within the last 5 years) from a post-secondary institution in Florida. One limitation from this study was that participants represented one geographical location, whereas there are nontraditional students enrolled at hundreds of post-secondary institutions across the globe. Another limitation from this study was that participants only represented nontraditional undergraduate students currently enrolled, as well as nontraditional students who graduated in the last five years from a Florida public institution. The final limitation from this study was the subjectivity. Rudestam and Newton (2015) state that one of the researcher's responsibilities, is to convince themselves and their current audience that the findings are based on a critical investigation (p. 131).

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of lived experiences of nontraditional students who utilize support services at a public post-secondary institution in Florida. This study set out to understand the academic needs of nontraditional students attending public postsecondary schools in Florida. In order to gain this understanding, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to the answer following research question and sub-questions stated in Chapter 2.

RQ1: What support services during their enrollment do nontraditional college students need from their institution?

RQ2: What obstacles or barriers do nontraditional college students experience at their institution?

RQ2 sub-question: What obstacles or barriers did nontraditional students who graduated from a Florida post-secondary institution experience at their institutions?

RQ3: What specific academic and support services would nontraditional undergraduate students like to see implemented to help support their academic success.

An IPA approach helped to reveal the many complexities of the educational experiences of all the participants documented in this chapter. The participants shared their lived experiences related to utilizing support services at their respective institution. A comprehensive account of each case was documented, and the findings highlighted the experiences of these specific nontraditional students and the challenges they are currently

facing or have faced while enrolled at a post-secondary institution in Florida. Upon analyzing the data, the researcher began by presenting the common themes discovered in the data by first exploring the themes as they emerged within and across the cases. The emergent themes were: 1) Academic Support; 2) Support Challenges; and 3) Access to Services.

## **Pre-Screening Survey Data**

### ***Participant Selection and Demographics***

The prescreening remained opened for six weeks which allowed the researcher to collect data from 51 participants. The participants represented 44 nontraditional students and seven traditional students. Furthermore, the data presented that these participants were either currently enrolled or have attended post-secondary institutions in the public, private, not-for-profit, and state college sectors. The age among these participants, ranged from 18-64, with 10 being currently enrolled in an undergraduate program and 41 graduated between the years of 1997 and 2020.

After the recruitment process, the researcher concluded that 12 out of 51 participants met the criteria for the study. However, five did not respond and one participant withdrew from the study before beginning because he was no longer interested. The six remaining participants confirmed their participation via email with the date and time of availability, as well as wet signing and returning the informed consent form (Appendix B). In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of both the participants and institutions, the researcher used pseudonyms shown in table 1, with a brief profile of each institution.

Table 2 displays that the six participants fell between the age range of 25-34, four

of the participants are currently enrolled and will be graduating within the next two years, the remaining two participants graduated from their undergraduate program between 2016 and 2019. Additionally, four of the participants were female and two were male.

Furthermore, the six participants made up of four females and two males crossed racial lines and came from different ethnic backgrounds. The pseudonyms selected to describe each participant and institution are as follows:

**Table 1**

*Institution Profiles*

Participants	Institution	Campus Location	Enrollment (2020)	Classification
Jennifer	Ocean University	South Florida	30,377	4-Year Public
Brandon Kendra Mya	Forest University	Central Florida	66,183	4-Year Public
Keith	Fire State College	South Florida	67,000	2-Year Public
Tiffany	Sky University	Tampa Bay	49,591	4-Year Public

**Table 2***Participant Demographics*

Characteristics	Jennifer	Kendra	Mya	Keith	Tiffany	Brandon
Enrollment Status	Currently Enrolled	Currently Enrolled	Currently Enrolled	Currently Enrolled	Graduated	Graduated
Classification	Senior	Senior	Senior	Junior	Alumni	Alumni
Program of Study	Early Childhood Education	Health Services Admin	Health Care Admin	Sports & Exercise Science	Biomedical Sciences & Psychology	Health Services Admin
Age Range	25-34	25-34	25-34	25-34	25-34	25-34
Graduation Date	May 2021	May 2021	May 2021	Dec 2022	May 2016	May 2019
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male
Marital Status	Married	Married	Married	Single	Married	Single
# of Children during Enrollment	2	0	2	0	1	0

*Interview Process*

Prior to the official day of the interview, the researcher met with each participant via Zoom's video conferencing platform to go over and explain the informed consent form (Appendix B), the purpose of the study, and to answer any last-minute questions that the participants had. Additionally, the researcher reminded the participants that they would need to be in a private room to allow for confidentiality and focus. Once everything was explained and all questions were answered, the researcher checked to ensure the consent form was signed and emailed and to solidify a date and time for the



interview.

On the day of the interview, the researcher reiterated the purpose of the interview, confidentiality, and asked the participant if he/she would like to continue. The researcher made sure to ask the participant if they had any questions before the beginning of the interview and to clarify anything that needed to be restated. The recording feature in the Zoom web-based platform was used to record all the interviews which allowed the researcher to go back and look at nonverbal cues and make sure that everything was documented.

### ***Coding and Data Analysis***

After all the participants were interviewed, the researcher listened and watched each recording multiple times to ensure everything was documented and what was said, was not misconstrued through the transcription process. Once the transcripts were completed, the researcher emailed a copy of the participant's transcribed interview to the respective participant to allow for member checking. All participants let the researcher know everything that was transcribed during the interview was correct. Once the transcripts were approved, the researcher uploaded them to NVivo. The NVivo software was used to analyze qualitative data. The researcher read each transcript numerous times to create and provide codes from each interview. Furthermore, the researcher proceeded to code each emerging theme with the information provided by NVivo.

The researcher reviewed the transcripts and recordings multiple times to ensure the accuracy of each interview. Furthermore, the researcher will be utilizing the steps of IPA to analyze the data. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach that is targeted to contribute a detailed analysis of the participant's lived

experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Furthermore, there were instances where one theme emerged more than once as it related to the research questions.

### **Theme Analysis**

In this section, the researcher's focal point will be the themes and findings of the study. Through the interview process, the researcher was able to collect the knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences these participants had with support services at their post-secondary institution. Table 3 represents the summary of the research questions and the data source and analysis method.

### **Academic Support**

#### *Advising and financial aid*

All six participants (100%) of the participants reflected on the services they used during their time at their post-secondary institution. Services such as tutoring, the writing lab, the library, and the medical clinic were among the ones that were mentioned and were used frequently, sometimes up to three times per semester, when available. However, the Office of Academic Advising and the Office of Financial Aid at the institutions were utilized most frequently as each participant in the study mentioned using these two specific offices a minimum of five times per semester. Winston and Sandor (1984) mention that nontraditional students prefer some sort of developmental advising when speaking to an academic advisor about their courses and how to get ensure they are on track to graduate as quick as possible.

Jennifer, who is currently enrolled at Ocean University and is classified as a senior, majoring in Early Childhood Education reflected on this experience by saying, “I have used financial aid and honestly, they were great. They are really quick with

everything. I could call the office anytime they really were able to answer my questions. So, I really did not have a problem with that department at all. Lastly, with advising, Advising was not hard to get or set an appointment, the only thing is with the advising they want you to take five classes a semester because they want you to graduate in the two- years. Their goal is to get you graduate period, and they want you to do it in the quickest way possible now can you choose to only take three classes absolutely but, with what they are telling you, you want to get it done as soon as possible.”

Kendra who is currently enrolled at Forest University and is classified as a senior, majoring in Health Services Administration, details her experience stating, "I have used Academic Advising and Financial Aid. So, my first appointment at Forest University was great, because they literally sat down and told me what I needed to graduate, what would happen if I decided I wanted to change my degree, and a breakdown of all my courses and what courses, I should take together what courses, I should not take together. So, regarding student advising, they did a good job with that portion of it. As it relates to financial aid, I received aid during my first semester at Forest University which was the first-generation scholarship but lost it because I was getting assimilated to the university and new environment and my grades slipped. However, once my grades were back on track the office of financial aid helped me and walked me through the process to make sure all my paperwork and documents were submitted on time in order to receive aid to pay for my classes."

Mya who is currently enrolled at Forest University majoring in Healthcare Administration and classified as a senior, highlights a positive interaction and details by saying, “I did apply for financial aid when I first started, and the staff was super friendly

and helpful but after everything was processed, they let me know I did not qualify for aid because they said I made too much money, but they did give me advice and links to get scholarships to help with funding my education. Just recently I spoke to an advisor about graduation, after putting in my application for graduation to go over everything I needed to do in order to ensure I graduated on time. Additionally, when I started at my institution, I did have someone that was reaching out to me on a monthly basis to check-in. She was helping me set goals and give me tips and managing my workload. I think we had like four calls, so it was maybe four months' worth of communication. So, and it was nice. I appreciated it because it made me feel like I was actually part of something bigger, so that was good."

Keith who currently attends Fire State College and is classified as a junior majoring in Sports and Exercises Science experienced a lot of challenges. He describes his experience utilizing the Office of Academic Advising as "jumping through hoops" and states that "Academic Advising, more specifically my advisor. my advisor was always available all although this is still a smaller college. My advisor always made himself available. I could have texted my advisor and things like that and, he also helped that he is the advisor for the club that I am in. So, I still had more access to him, but my advisor helped me out so much so much. I would say that the university definitely treats them well. So, the quality of advisors really feels as if they cared. I mostly spoke with him, but they did a very good job in hiring really good advisors, they made us feel as if you are part of the family there. That was a really good and more memorable part. In terms of the quality of communication. I never had to wait more than 12 hours before I got a response for anything and usually when I text my advisor if I could not get like a

meeting or anything like that, he will respond within maybe 40 minutes or so, but just my experience with that helped me get out of a lot of foolish decisions that I was going to make especially with my core schedule. So, my advisor definitely kept up communication. Also, my advisor actually would check-in and give me updates. For example, he would say hey this is what is going on with your degree right now or, this is the class that you may need to go ahead and consider taking because this is probably new, and based on the course load, you may want to go ahead and go to the bookstore and get this book, along with another book and he just gave me certain tips on not just what classes I need, but how to navigate. So, that was really good reminding me about it. I never miss a date on class schedule and never not known when the class was full or not, that helped with a lot of anxiety being taken off."

Tiffany who attended and graduated from Sky University in May 2016, double majored in Biomedical Sciences and Psychology described her experience by saying, "The financial aid staff was helpful in helping navigate everything and showed me how it all works and what to do and fill out the proper forms. So, I would say financial aid was helpful and friendly. Academic advising you get paired with an academic advisor, you do not get to pick your advisor. When I first went and toured the school and everything. The lady I sat with she was very nice and understanding." Tiffany went on by stating that "I just kind of used them when I was enrolling for my classes and once, I figured that out I didn't use them anymore."

***Mentorship program.*** Ideas such as a "mentorship program" where junior or senior nontraditional students would be paired with an incoming nontraditional student, to teach them the ropes and answer any questions the new students may have. For

example, throughout her interview, Tiffany had recommendations that she felt would help nontraditional students tremendously, she went on to say “I would definitely want to see some type of mentorship program. Sky University has a lot of transfer and nontraditional students which is a big part of their population. So, I do not get why they do not support us better. So, I would say some sort of support system, mentors, mentorship program or where a nontraditional student is coming in and someone who has been there before, who is nontraditional knows how to navigate the campus and help us with things such as figuring out how to book an academic advising session especially if you have work or, things like that.”

Additionally, Mya looking at it from the online nontraditional student lens, goes on to state, “Even if you are an online degree-seeking student maybe having the option to come and, speak to someone face to face and maybe having some kind of mentoring program, for adult learners could probably very beneficial. I think I would have benefited from some type of mentor or somebody who is either been through my program or going through my program, maybe even, a senior student who is in their graduating year and they can possibly receive some type of extra credit points or, credit for being a mentor to the lower-class men I feel that that would be nice and helpful.”

***Life experience credit.*** There are a few institutions that provide college credit for life experiences. This allows a student to have a fast track towards their degree. Keith was very adamant and in support of receiving credit or some type of option to take retake a course free of charge. He states, "maybe like a credit to retake certain entry-level courses. If I were an institution for nontraditional students, I would offer some sort of scholarship or apply for some sort of credit to allow you to take, maybe pre-algebra or,

ENC 1101. Especially as a nontraditional student a lot of things are kind of harder to learn sometimes. So, if you went to college and you did not do so well and if you took the classes before, but maybe not enough to get to the next level, so by offering a credit saying "hey listen you do not have to pay for this class, but we're just going to require you to go ahead and take this class over and get a refresher part of it. So, you can, feel confident enough in yourself to push you to the next level. I do not think they will lose any money doing that. So why not?"

*Student life and other support services.* There were other student support services mentioned in the interviews (e.g., Student health, parking services, and shuttle services). Tiffany described her experiences by stating, "I used the clinic on campus to get my immunization. There is a hospital on campus that I used when I almost went blind. I used the Student center, parking services, and the shuttle my last year there because my apartment was on the bus line, so it was free and convenient. I also used academic advising quite a bit when I first got there. I like the bus line because they were in really early and really late so that was good for me. The library was 24 hours with a Starbucks, so I loved that. Those were the most accessible, you know, timewise and they were 24h hours, the bus shuttle ran early to late so, within my crazy schedule of school and work. I can still use those services. But yeah, those were the ones I use the most because they were flexible with my schedule, so they worked for me.

Brandon who attended and graduated from Forest University in December 2019, majored in Health Service Administration. His experience with support services were always after normal business hours due to his "availability after work", he described his experience stating "I utilized what was just out of normal business hours things I could

use like the library. He continued with “being able to go to the library and be in that environment and ask questions there was helpful because there were a lot of people like the help desk that was able to kind of help me out as far as where I can you know like resources around campus.

*Specialized nontraditional student support services and personnel.* Participants felt that an office that specialized in supporting nontraditional students would be a great benefit to them. A recommendation from Jennifer consisted of her stating, "I would say create an office that would support nontraditional students. In this office, the first important thing is for everyone working there to sit down with each nontraditional student and find out their specific situation. For example, do you have kids? Do you work full-time? Are you married? Are you a single parent? How far do you have to drive to get to campus? Do you have transportation? Especially if they are coming in as a nontraditional student. The office should also specifically look at the age range because that is a big indicator as a nontraditional student."

Jennifer continued and stated "they should have specific people from each department or college represented. An expert to come up with a plan to see what would work best for that specific nontraditional student if they are working, have kids, etc. Also, what classes should be taken together and what classes should not be taken together. If someone is taking 2 classes that the workloads are extremely high, and they are a single parent they may have a tough time. Opposed to getting one class that has a smaller workload and one heavy. This office would be more centralized and more for support. Additionally, the institution needs to offer more evening in classes than daytime classes for us, nontraditional students."



Brandon had a similar idea, with the experiences he had, he wanted to have a specific office created to “support us” he goes into detail stating “the office would need other individuals that were nontraditional students, people that have kind of gone through the experience of going to school late. I mean even because when you walk into the office and you see individuals that are in your same boat and got the job done and finished. One that is going to keep you motivated to finish, and two it is going to show you that it is doable because a lot of times when you go back to school at a later age and you see so many people that are so much younger than you, it is kind of discouraging. So, that to me is very important.”

Keith being so big on communication and finding ways to support nontraditional students getting reengaged described his experiences and ideas as "easy and amazing". He states that he would "definitely have a nontraditional advisor, that would be amazing because there are more of us than people realize and nontraditional comes from a bunch of different types of avenues and I think that even if they have one or two people that we can go to that understands us as nontraditional students that would be amazing. For example, hey listen I am 27, I got a baby at home and this is going on and as nontraditional students, we experienced life at a different wavelength. So, I feel having someone that actually understands there would definitely be great."

Kendra’s recommendations were two folds, she spoke about having a “specialized office with specialized personnel.” She goes into detail by saying “an office where individuals that work there have experience dealing with students who are 25 and older and transfer students”. She goes into detail describing that the individuals in these positions at this specific office "would actually have some type of process in place where

you are speaking to one or two of the same people when going to them about your grades, courses, and everything in general. For example, if we had this nontraditional student support office, we know you are, struggling in this that and other, you can then look me up with my ID number, and you say, Okay, I see that your advisor is Mrs. Smith, let me just send an email or call Mrs. Smith and let her know that you are here. Then I come in, let us say, two semesters later, I have that same question you send me back to Mrs. Smith because Mrs. Smith already has my case file, she already knows everything about me, she already has all of those know all of those notes. I feel that will be perfect because then I know Mrs. Smith actually has a personal interest in seeing me graduate and succeed, versus someone just doing a job, but just saying, yeah, you need to take these courses and that is it or you need to go to this certain building and that is it, but if someone has a personal interest in you, everyone wins."

### **Support Challenges**

#### *Access to Services*

The two participants that were classified as alumni detailed their struggle with just accessing the support services or receiving instructional assistance from their professors when needed. Tiffany described the experience as "a bit challenging" when trying to use services and "disheartening" when trying to get help from her professor. She details those experiences by saying, "My entire undergrad career was working full time and the times that they had these activities were not conducive to people who did anything other than just school, even seeing sometimes my academic advisor, that was a bit challenging because of the hours that they had available. They did not have any virtual interviews or phone appointments. They could help you somewhat via email, but it was not the same

experience as if you went in person. I kind of learned a lot of things on my own because it was not always conducive for work. Tutoring was tough too. They always had it at one o'clock when I took bio Chem there which was very hard, I almost never went, but yeah, a lot of it I figured out on my own because the times that they have had everything did not really match up with my schedule.”

Tiffany continued by saying, "the campus I went to did not invest in me, maybe if I had gone to their regional campus, I would have had a different experience as opposed to going to a big school where there were a lot of 18-year-olds and just a different lifestyle than I had, you know. Just go to school and I had to work and go to school. So that was predominantly the student population. So, this school catered predominantly to that. I do not know if they had any specific resources for nontraditional students. Also, I wish they had better tutoring times and hours for a lot of different things or if they were able to let you do a phone interview with your advisor or virtual."

After describing her challenges with support services, Tiffany recalled a specific instance with her first professor and stated, “I remember a bad experience with my bio Chem teacher specifically. I tried to talk to him about my grade. I went to go try and see him about my first exam because my first exam was not good. I went and I was able to look over my exam." "I think I went into work later that day and I went, and I looked at my exam, but pretty much I don't feel like he really cared he explicitly told us in class in front of all 300 of us he's working on his research, it's a big research university like they thrive off of that and he said, that's where the institution gets their funding and that's what he's into and he said, we pretty much have to figure it out on our own because he's busy with his research and he had no issue saying that in front of all of us, and he even went on

further to say I'm tenured and the dean can't fire me so deal with it. So literally, that is what he said so, that also made me nervous to ask anyone else, any other professor for help. That was the very first class I took there, my first semester taking Bio Chem, and this is the first exam I didn't do well and that was kind of the experience I was met with, I don't know, maybe the others were great but, that deterred me from even finding out if they were great because he just made it a point to say focus on my research and you know it's undergrad biochem and you can figure it out and he said in front of the whole class he can't get fired because he's tenured."

Brandon's experience accessing services was somewhat the same but in different ways. He recalled by saying "the ability to just have access to someone and get questions answered was difficult and when sending emails, I had to wait upwards of three business days for a response." He went on to highlight other things by stating, "I ran into a lot of obstacles when trying to get access to advisors and things like that, simply because I did not really have the access. Being from a distance and typically, I would be on hold for a long period of time or if I sent an email, I would usually find the answer myself before getting a response. So, it was really about the access and not having access to resources as much as if I were on campus in order to walk into the office or set an appointment.

Brandon continued to talk about the challenges just to speak to someone and stated, "the ability to access someone and get questions answered was just tough. If I were to call someone it would usually be when I am working a 9 am to 5 pm shift at work, I would typically try to catch them on my lunch break and be on hold for the majority, if not the entire time of my lunch break, and I end up having to go back to work and not be able to get my questions answered. Also, sending an email and waiting two to

three business days for a response. So, I would just typically either ask a colleague or research the answer myself."

Support services at any post-secondary institution are supposed to be easy and accessible for all students to utilize so they can get what they need to matriculate and get to graduation. However, each of the participants indicated in some form or fashion that it was difficult or often impossible to access support quickly and efficiently, and when they did finally get in touch with someone, each participant felt that the institution collectively did not support them, especially when they tried to seek out services when it was available. Tiffany recalls a specific instance where she mentions "I really found that this particular campus was not geared towards nontraditional students" She goes on to say, "So in my experience, I just did understand why the campus was not really geared towards students who work full time. The times that they had activities were not conducive to people who did anything other than just school, even seeing sometimes my academic advisor, that was a bit challenging because of the hours that they had available Jennifer's experience when she actually was able to meet someone was described by using the word "basic support". She goes on by saying, "I think it is more for their numbers to make them look good, honestly. Their goal is to get you graduate period, and they want you to do it in the quickest way possible, now you can choose to only take three classes absolutely but, with what they are telling you, they want you to get it done as soon as possible. The university does not ask about your current situation to see if you can handle the course load. I think if they were to ask what is going on in your personal life, they can properly advise much better. I feel they do not take time to understand or figure out my current situation to advise better."

Tiffany continued to explain and stated. "as it relates to Academic Advising, the advisor just told me these are the classes I need to take and this is how many need to take a semester to graduate and that is pretty much it, that was all the advising, they did not help, and they did not tell you anything extra." "I remember during orientation, the advisor told me I had to take this class before this class, which is fine, I appreciate that. However, he told me that this was a hard class so you might want to do X." "I feel like they should tell you kind of what the class entails. They know what these classes entail they should just give you a brief overview especially when you are going into the semester, so tell me which ones I should take together which ones I should not. I feel that there are a lot of classes that should not be taken together because there's so much work and it should be spread out. However, other ones can be taken together no problem you can take extra classes because there's other classes are a lot easier. Honestly, they were all very nice I did not have a problem with any one of them I just feel like they just do not take the time to learn my specific situation, it is just a blanket support for all students, and you can't do that."

Kendra was proud of being a first-generation college student, even though she took some time off after high school she knew she wanted to go back to school and be a role model for her kids. She details her experiences by saying, "I think Forest University could have done better by being more available because I was a first-generation student and letting me know what services and other scholarships were available to me. I did not know what was available for me until I joined an organization. So, the services that they were providing I did not see it. I did not feel like I had that support, or they had my best interest enough for me to talk to them, I basically did not feel that Forest University put

me as a priority.”

Kendra recalled an instance when she called the academic advising office and said, “I recall calling into the office of academic advising, and I felt as if the advisor I spoke with told me anything that I did not know already know, she just confirmed what I already knew. There was another instance I called because I graduate soon and want to make sure I am on track to graduate and I felt as if I reached out for advice, but kind of told the person my plans and what I was planning on doing and the advisor just repeated what I just said. I guess that is why I never really went to them because you know it is almost like children trying to teach me. Their job is to make sure that they are helping us and keeping us on track and making sure that we are on track to graduate. Not for me to call them let them know that I am on track to graduate.”

Mya talked about "feeling disconnected" being an online student. As her time winds down and she gets ready to graduate this semester (May 2021). She thought back to when she first started and details only one encounter from someone at her university. She described her encounter saying, "I remember someone reaching out to me when I first started at Forest University but that stopped after the first four months. However, I feel maybe a follow-up, as it relates to the goals the individual and I set up in the beginning, even though we set those goals, in the beginning, there were long term and short term goals, it would have been nice to maybe have those long term goals refresh from when I started and to be honest I do not remember what I said but if they documented that and followed up and say, hey, you're in your senior semester, this is what your goal was, have you met that or, how can I help you get to that, that would have been nice."

Mya continues by saying “I remember attending orientation and they provide, documentation, rather than explaining the services and how it benefits me. It is already difficult because you are trying to, complete school, work full time, and have life, so in terms of access those services, they were not really detailed like in the presentation or at the orientation. So, it was not something that I ever used.”

Keith’s experience with support was detailed in terms of getting access to a “physical location and appointment setting”. He talked more about the process of just trying to locate the building to speak to someone or even set an appointment and described it as “jumping through hoops”. He continues to go on by saying. “I feel the school itself needed to dedicate a little bit more effort into that facility, it was way too claustrophobic for the number of students that needed to be there on a daily basis, we're still a smaller college but you know that we still had in the graduating class may be about you know 10,000 students or more". "So, you know, it is so when we look at that, it is like all these students are coming and getting to an advisor, especially in the beginning of the semesters, it still goes on all through but just getting to an advisor, you have to plan out your whole day for it. I have had to miss two classes because I was waiting to speak to my advisor. So, it was in terms of getting access to them, it was just horrible.”

### ***Extended Hours for Services***

Extending hours that benefit all students including the ones that work during normal business hours is important. The participants described numerous instances where they either “cannot reach someone” or “cannot access services” due to working all day.

Brandon goes on my saying, “having people that are willing to work until 7 maybe 8 pm like how the library is open late for people to study. It is crazy that we



cannot access resources that late, which to me does not really make sense, simply because, why would the library be open late and no other services. I feel that the library being open late clearly means that people are still needing to do things for school, why can't people still need to see an advisor? Why can't people still need to go to counseling? Why can't people still need to do all these things that are accessible during the daytime for traditional students for nontraditional students? we are paying the same tuition as a traditional student, but not be able to access the same resources. It is kind of just not fair."

Tiffany states that "It would also help to have Academic Advising and tutoring at various hours of the day or offer up some more hours. Maybe hiring just tutors instead of using the grad students who have limited schedules. I feel if the school hired actual tutors who are just in the tutoring lab and that is just their job, maybe they could have more flexibility, they could be there in the morning and in the graduate students come in the night, or vice versa, whatever would work for them that way more students could take advantage of this. Lastly, more understanding advisors and some sort of support system for nontraditional students."

Mya being an online student wanted to focus more on the online/distant education nontraditional students that do not or cannot physically make it to campus. She says, "creating something quick like a like a chat type of service where you can send in a question to the chat and there is somebody that is monitoring the chat and either they are able to answer your question right there and then or connect you to the right person."

### **Answering Research Questions**

An IPA approach helped to understand the lived experiences of nontraditional students who utilized support services at a public post-secondary institution in Florida.

The study examined how support services can be supportive or detrimental to the nontraditional student population.

***What support services during their enrollment do nontraditional college students need from their institution?"***

In an effort to understand the lived experiences of the nontraditional student participants, the researcher had to have fixed boundaries of the participants to limit it to currently enrolled nontraditional students and nontraditional students who graduated within the past five years. The participants talked about the specific student support services that they utilized which included library services, tutoring, and the writing lab. However, 100% of the participants highlighted using two main offices, the Office of Financial Aid, and the Office of Academic Advising. Academic advising is the place they needed because they wanted to ensure they are taking the right classes to graduate and financial aid, to make sure they qualified to receive funding to fund their education.

For these participants, the expectations that they had for the services they accessed were not the only key to their development but also their success. "Their job is to make sure that they're helping us and keeping us on track and making sure that we're on track to graduate" (Kendra). The participants highlighted different instances where they found that using the services was extremely helpful. "The only experience I had was with the assistant academic advisor. I think we had like four calls, so it was maybe four months' worth of communication. So, and it was nice. I appreciated it because it made me feel like I was actually part of something bigger, so that was good." (Mya). The feeling of being supported went a long way for these participants, whether it was someone reaching out to set goals with these students or just being able to talk to someone to point them in

the right direction, they wanted and needed these services to succeed. However, this was inconsistent, and still left the participants not being served well.

***What obstacles or barriers do nontraditional college students experience at their institution?***

Feeling as if they were not supported or having to “jump through hoops” were some of the ways the participants described the barriers or obstacles they encountered at their institution. While some felt that the institution’s facility was not conducive to support their needs. Keith described his feeling by stating “the school itself needed to dedicate a little bit more effort into that facility, it was way too claustrophobic for the number of students that needed to be there on a daily basis. Just like Keith, others felt that they did not feel that their institution took the time to get to know them properly in order to support them, “The university does not ask about your current situation to see if you can handle the course load” (Jennifer).

Additionally, in this study the participants described different ways outside of asking institutional personnel for support due to their past experiences. Classmates, student organizations, and peers were some of the avenues that were used to navigate their way to success. "So, in regard to how I knew what classes I needed to take, how many classes I needed to take, and what I had to do in those classes, that information came from my organization members that are/were in the same major as me (Kendra).

***What obstacles or barriers did nontraditional students who graduated from a Florida postsecondary institution experience at their institution?***

Participants noted instances where support services were not conducive to their availability, which forced them to overcome obstacles and challenges on their own. They

also felt as if these services were only catered to the traditional population of students. If they wanted to support all students, the student support services at these institutions would not just be open during the regular 9am-5pm business hours. Additionally, the participants detailed instances where they tried to reach out for help from certain departments and ran into some challenges such as, not being able to reach someone or waiting upwards of 3 days for a response. The participants stated when they or actually reached someone, they did not feel supportive or understanding, instead they were met with resistance and doubt of their ability to succeed. Each participant was able to describe an experience that left them feeling down and out. For example, Tiffany stated, "I really found that this particular campus was not geared towards commuter or nontraditional students or not really geared towards students who work full time, which I did and went to school, a lot of the activities were at times where normal working people can't go."

Tiffany continued to describe her experiences by saying, "accessing services that are meant to help was impossible. I ran into a lot of obstacles when trying to get to advisors and things like that, simply because I did not really have the access. Being from a distance and typically when I called, I would be on hold for a long period of time or if I sent an email, I would usually find the answer myself before getting a response. So, it was really about not having access to resources".

***What specific academic and support services would nontraditional undergraduate students like to see implemented to help support their academic success?***

The participants all highlighted a need for a specific support services and "some type of mentorship program" dedicated to supporting nontraditional students at post-secondary institutions. The participants not only mentioned having a dedicated office or

mentor that would help them to assimilate better to the institution, but to have someone to talk to when things get rough and a place to go and get information about resources available to them. Mya added other ways of supporting nontraditional students by recommending "maybe something quick like a like a chat type of service where there's you can send in the chat and there's somebody that's monitoring the chat and bring you to the right person".

All the participants believe that the institutions can and should find different methods outside of what they normally do now to support nontraditional students at their respective campuses. Whether it is "people willing to work until seven maybe 8 pm" or having a "nontraditional student advisor" they believe it is doable in their eyes and that having the institution go the extra mile to support them can go along way when supporting this population of students.

### **Summary**

Offering services with nontraditional students in mind can be beneficial for everyone involved. If support staff can try to cut through challenges and solve the problems expeditiously, nontraditional students would be able to feel supported. Thinking back to what they needed, recommendations for a specialized support service office for nontraditional students were provided and became a theme for the participants. Despite all the hardship that these participants described, they were willing to give feedback on how their institution could do better in supporting nontraditional students.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter highlights the key themes identified in the analysis of nontraditional students' lived experiences utilizing support services at a public post-secondary institution in Florida, as presented in Chapter 2 and other places throughout this document. This phenomenological study was designed to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of nontraditional students who utilized support services at their post-secondary institution in the state of Florida. From this study, findings highlighted the specific resources that these participants are using or have used during their time of enrollment, the obstacles and challenges they faced, and some recommendations that could potentially alleviate some issues nontraditional students face at postsecondary institutions. The sample population consisted of six participants, four of which are currently enrolled at a post-secondary institution and the other two graduated from a post-secondary institution within the last five years.

### **Discussion and Implication of the Findings**

The discussion for the findings was based on the themes that emerged from the study, which were;

- 1) Academic Support – What students felt they needed in order to feel supported and successful.
- 2) Support Challenges – The obstacles these participants described through their experiences with support services.
- 3) Access to Services- The ability to utilize services that were supposed to be

meant for all students.

### **Student Integration Theory**

The theoretical framework that served as the guide between the data collection procedures and interview protocol framework was Tinto's (1993) student integration theory on-views of student attrition. Tinto's student integration theory's viewpoint mentions that a lack of involvement in connection to the institution and engagement contributes to the departure from the institution. Due to this nature, the correlation between involvement and engagement provided a framework to examine the social and academic integration in relation to their commitment to the institution.

### ***Academic Support***

What is needed for a nontraditional student to succeed in order to matriculate and graduate from their institution. The variety of student support services are imperative to ensure the success of nontraditional students (Hittepole, 2019). The participants that were able to access these services had positive experiences with some of the individuals they reached out to for help. Instances they described as "helpful" or "great" during the first encounter with staff.

### ***Support Challenges***

Lundberg (2010) states that if there could be a strong correlation between the relationship of nontraditional students and faculty, staff, and administrators at college campuses, there would be a strong predictor of learning and success. The process of understanding nontraditional students and creating services that support them must start with understanding who they are, what they care about, and what obstacles they face. In

the absence of support from institutions, nontraditional students might be forced to withdraw from their institution. If they chose not to withdraw; they may not fully assimilate into the campus culture. Lastly, they may not have the means or knowledge to receive or access any form of support (Gordon, 2014). This population of students will require support that does not look like the traditional method that institutions are providing. Participants in this study described their encounters with faculty and staff at their respective institution as “unsupportive and not helpful”.

### *Access to Services*

The current student services that are on college campuses were designed and created for a type of student that attended college over 50 years ago (Lerner & Sanford, 2019). The diversity of the nontraditional student population advocates that they need different resources than the traditional student population to succeed during their time in a postsecondary institution (Sulzen, 2017). Although nontraditional students stand in need of institutions to be more understanding and flexible, positive interactions with faculty and staff also has a large impact on their success (Gonclave and Trunk, 2014). The participants detailed their experiences as “challenging” and “disheartening” when trying to access services when they were in need. Nontraditional students have needs just like the traditional student population, just because they look different does not mean that institutions should not focus on what those needs are. Markel (2015) states there should be a considerable amount of flexibility so that nontraditional students can access the services they need when they need it, changing the narrative and how support looks like is a key element in shifting the way post-secondary institutions support nontraditional students.



The purpose of this study was to investigate the needs of nontraditional students who are currently enrolled or have graduated (within the last five years) from a public post-secondary institution in the state of Florida. The findings reported were acquired through interviewing nontraditional students who are currently enrolled and others who graduated within the last five years from a post-secondary institution in the state of Florida. The participants described in detail the obstacles and challenges they faced in order to get support. The data in this study will assist with the development of a nontraditional student support services Inter-Organizational partnerships to help this population of students get assimilated to the institution they choose to enroll in. The nontraditional student population is growing and will continue to grow as the years come, institutions need to be prepared to support them or these students will continue to feel that they do not belong which can be detrimental to their success.

It is unacceptable that nontraditional students do not have the same opportunities as their traditional student counter parts at institutions when they are paying the same tuition and student service fees. Post-secondary institutions are supposed to support all students. Currently, institutions are revamping how they look at diversity, equity and inclusion based on what is happening in today's society. However, they are still missing the point, the nontraditional student population is diverse population of students in its own way, so institutions need to also add this population of students in those plans.

### **Interpretation and Reflection**

Results of this study indicated that nontraditional students are not provided with adequate support by their institution. Chen (2017) states that the services that are available to nontraditional students are either below par or nonexistent on most college

and university campuses. There is a gap in supporting this population of students, which causes them to fall in between the cracks. This is not just a one campus problem, this issue spans across multiple campuses. Nontraditional student's educational needs are unique and at times require specific attention from post-secondary institutions (Owusu-Agyeman, Fourie-Malherbe, & Frick, 2018).

This study has added to the conversations about nontraditional students that are happening at some institutions but, not others. This study enhanced the knowledge surrounding the understanding and supporting of nontraditional students wholistically. It also highlights that without a well-informed faculty, staff, and administration, post-secondary institutions as a whole, are failing one of the largest population of students at their institution. Gonclaves et al (2014) stated that faculty and staff that are in place to support nontraditional students on their academic journey seldom have the skillset or knowledge to provide adequate support to assist them.

Hittepole (2019) states there is a belief that every institution has the power to change the narrative, the most important aspect is understanding the needs and challenges of nontraditional students, then implement policies, procedures and possibly creating a dedicated nontraditional student support services to help them. Once there is understanding, individuals can implement certain practices that will help with the challenges and obstacles nontraditional students face. It will take an entire institution from the President down to the brand-new employee starting on his/her first day to support this population.

Nontraditional students need a variety of support in order to be successful as they matriculate through college. The diversity of the nontraditional student population

advocates that they need more and specialized resources than the traditional student population to succeed during their time in a postsecondary institution (Sulzen, 2017). In an effort to better understand the needs and how to support this population, Hittepole (2019) states, for institutions to better address the needs of nontraditional students, a combination of both support and academic support services must be at the forefront to tackle their unique needs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

With the increasing number of nontraditional students in postsecondary institutions and after analyzing the data collected out of this study from the six participants who agreed to share their experiences, it is understood that there is more work to be done. Lerner and Sanford, (2019) argues that the current student services that are on college campuses were designed and created for a type of student that attended college over 50 years ago.

Future research is recommended in exploring the lived experiences of online nontraditional students. As institutions use online as a recruiting technique to enroll more students at a distance, it is important to know if these students are supported and connected to the university even at a distance.

Next, capturing data on the experiences of African American male nontraditional students enrolled at post-secondary institutions. According to a study by Rosser-Mims, Palmer, and Harroff (2014), African American male students have limited access to financial aid, role models, and maintaining a work-life balance which were some of the barriers they faced while attempting to be successful while enrolled. Additionally, the NCES, (2017) reported that only 34% of African American males graduated within 6

years of starting a bachelors' degree. This population is unique in its own ways and finding out the experiences and how to support them will be key to breaking down barriers and challenges around them.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this study, the researcher found that the participants indicated two things. First, the participants stated not being able to access support services when they needed it, describing their experiences as “jumping through hoops” or “a bit challenging” indicating the issues they faced while just trying to access to a specific service. The second was not feel as if they were supported enough to succeed when they were able to speak to someone. The participants described that they were met with resistance, closed doors, and having to find support through friends, family, and student organizations.

Upper, mid, and low-level administration, along with faculty and other staff must engage in conversations that will open doors and create opportunities for involvement, support, and growth inside and outside of the classroom for nontraditional students. Colleges and universities have a wide variety of support services in place for all students to take advantage of, they include but are not limited to orientation, academic advising, admission financial aid, tutoring services, counseling services, and student affairs, which assist with overall retention, personal growth, early warning alerts, and financial counseling (Hodge, 2017; Rudge, 2014). Every institution has a duty to support all students and tailor that support for each specific student. As the nontraditional student population continues to grow, it will call for a transformational way of thinking in order to understand and support them.

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## Appendix A

Permission Letter for Use and Modification of Student Interview Guide

8/18/2020

Mail - Michael Deneus - Outlook

click links or open  
attachments unless you  
recognize the sender and  
know that the content is safe.

Thank you for your email. You are more than welcome to use whatever might be helpful to you. Best wishes for a successful research and writing experience!  
Stephanie

**Stephanie J. Bannister, PhD** (She/Her/Hers)  
Assistant Vice Provost Student Success

101 Holton Hall  
1101 Mid-Campus Drive North  
Manhattan, Kansas 66506  
(785)532-6492

Up to date information on [K-State's response to COVID-19](#)

*Responsibility – Empathy – Relator – Learner – Achiever*

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**From:** Michael Deneus <md1871@mynsu.nova.edu>  
**Sent:** Monday, July 20, 2020 1:05 PM  
**To:** Stephanie Bannister <sbann@ksu.edu>  
**Subject:** Dissertation Instrument Permission

Good afternoon Dr. Bannister,

My name is Michael Deneus, I'm currently enrolled at Nova Southeastern University's doctoral program. I came across your dissertation titled "The experiences of Non-traditional students utilizing student services"

The reason for my email is to see if I can get permission to use your instrument for my research on nontraditional students and their experiences utilizing support services at a institution in central Florida.

I did send you a message on twitter before finding this email address. I do apologize for reaching out more than once.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sent from my iPhone



8/18/2020

Mail - Michael Deneus - Outlook

**Re: Dissertation Instrument Permission**

Stephanie Bannister &lt;sbann@ksu.edu&gt;

Wed 7/22/2020 9:59 AM

To: Michael Deneus &lt;md1871@mynsu.nova.edu&gt;

NSU Security WARNING: This is an external email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know that the content is safe.

Yes - by all means consider this as approval to adjust, adapt and use as needed and helpful. Best wishes - Stephanie

**Stephanie J. Bannister, PhD** (She/Her/Hers)  
Assistant Vice Provost Student Success

101 Holton Hall  
1101 Mid-Campus Drive North  
Manhattan, Kansas 66506  
(785)532-6492  
Up to date information on [K-State's response to COVID-19](#)

*Responsibility – Empathy – Relator – Learner – Achiever*

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**From:** Michael Deneus <md1871@mynsu.nova.edu>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, July 22, 2020 5:37 AM  
**To:** Stephanie Bannister <sbann@ksu.edu>  
**Subject:** Re: Dissertation Instrument Permission

Good morning Dr. Bannister,

Thank you. This is to confirm that I have received and understand that you've provided me permission to use your instrument for my study. Will I also be able to modify the instrument to fit my study?

Sent from my iPhone

On Jul 20, 2020, at 2:21 PM, Stephanie Bannister <sbann@ksu.edu> wrote:

NSU Security WARNING: This is an external email. Do not

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/search/id/AAQkAGFINWY1ZJU1LT11NDUINDJhNC1hOGZmLTlwNDdkM2UzMDI0ZQAQAFJDKDeXZ%2B9JOu1MrLGj...> 1/2

Appendix B  
Informed Consent Form

**General Informed Consent Form  
NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**



*The Experiences of Undergraduate Nontraditional Students Utilizing Student Services at Post-Secondary Institutions in Florida- A Qualitative Study*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice

Principal Investigator: Michael Deneus M.S Student Affairs, B.S. Criminal Justice

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Lisa Carbone, Ed.D.

Co-Investigator(s): Beverly Knox-Pipes, Ed. D

Site Information: The study will not take place at a specific physical setting. Instead, a population of nontraditional students will be recruited through Facebook and interviewed via Zoom.

Funding: Unfunded

**What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to investigate the needs of nontraditional students who is currently enrolled or have graduated from a Florida public institution. The findings of this study will provide institutional leaders and student support services staff with research-based recommendations for new programs, policies, and initiatives to support academic success for nontraditional students. Additionally, the results of this study will contribute to the current research on nontraditional students and how to support them, and the understanding of their needs as this population continues to increase.

**Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you fit two or more characteristics of a nontraditional student. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines nontraditional students as having at least one of the following characteristics: 25 years old and older, classified as an independent, delayed enrollment into college after completing high school, has a spouse, works full-time, and attends a postsecondary institution at least part-time. The researcher is interested in investigating your experience using student support services at your institution.

This study will include about 10-15 people.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will participate in a one Zoom interview with the researcher, that will take 60-minute. During and after the interview the researcher may have additional questions to clarify and responses given.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

- Engage in a 60-minute Zoom interview that will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher
- The researcher will guide you to answer questions that will help the researcher understand your story.
- Once the interview is transcribed, if the researcher has any additional questions a second Zoom session will be scheduled at a convenient time to clarify any ambiguity.
- The researcher will allow time for you to analyze what has been transcribed from the interview to ensure accuracy

### **Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life. The researcher will take extreme precaution to ensure your identity is kept confident and the transcripts remain under password protected software.

### **What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time or refuse to be in it. If you decide to leave or you do not want to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study before it is over, any information about you that was collected **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

### **What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

### **Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help provide information to you a satisfaction that this information will assist future research in similar topics involving nontraditional students.

### **Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. The information collected will be placed in a password-protected computer, stored at the researcher's home. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely in a password protected computer. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by shredding all notes and deleting all audio recordings.

**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio and/or video recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and other representatives of this institution, and any of the people who gave the researcher money to do the study (if applicable). The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:  
Michael Deneus

If primary is not available, contact:  
Lisa Carbone (954) 262-8295 ext. 28295

## Research Participants Rights

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
 Nova Southeastern University  
 (954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

**All space below was intentionally left blank.**

## Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

### **SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research

### Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed Name of Person Obtaining  
 Consent and Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &  
 Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

Appendix C  
Pre-Screening Survey

## Pre Screening Participation Information & Consent Form

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in a pre-screening evaluation to see if you are a potential candidate for a research study. This study's purpose is to investigate the needs of nontraditional students, who are currently enrolled or have graduated from a Florida public institution; your responses to this survey will determine your eligibility for the study.

If your responses indicate you are eligible to participate in the study, your details, including your name and email, will be electronically stored in a secure location by the researcher. If you are not eligible for the study, all your identifying details will be deleted but summary information about your questionnaire responses will be stored for research purposes only.

If you have any questions regarding the research, please contact: [md1871@mynsu.nova.edu](mailto:md1871@mynsu.nova.edu)

\* Required

1. Do you consent to this Pre-screening Questionnaire \*

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No Skip to section 4 (Thank you)

Pre-Screening Questions

Please answer all questions.

2. Please list your full name and email address \*

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2/18/2021

Pre Screening Participation Information &amp; Consent Form

3. Please select all descriptors that define your current enrollment status?

*Check all that apply.*

- Undergraduate Student
- Graduate Student
- Full-Time (Undergrad- Enrolled in at least 12 credit hours, Grad Enrolled in at least 3 credit hours)
- Part- Time ( Undergrad- Enrolled in at least 6 credit hours, Grad Enrolled in at least 3 credit hours)
- Alumni

4. If you selected "Alum" or "Graduate Student" above, what year did you graduate from undergrad? If you are currently enrolled as an undergrad student please type (N/A)

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What college or university did you attend while in undergrad?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your current age (if currently enrolled in an undergraduate program) or If you already graduated, what was your age when you graduated from an undergraduate program?

*Mark only one oval.*

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

2/18/2021

Pre Screening Participation Information &amp; Consent Form

7. Would you be willing to participate in a (60 min) interview with the researcher?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No Skip to section 3 (Thank You)

Thank  
You

Thank you for participating in this survey. If you are eligible to participate in the survey the researcher will contact you via email.

Thank you

Thank you for your time.

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Google Forms



## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

### **Interview Questions**

1. What type of student support services (i.e., financial aid, academic advising, admissions, student activities etc.) have you utilized most frequently during your enrollment at your institution?
2. What type of experiences with student support services left you feeling as though the university could have done better?
3. What type of experiences with student support services left you feeling as though the university served you well?
4. Can you describe for me your experiences with student support staff?
5. In what ways has your institution demonstrated an investment in you, as a nontraditional student?
6. Describe the things your university could do to make your time at the college/university more enjoyable and enhance your learning experience?
7. How did utilizing student support service prepare you for educational attainment?
8. If you were tasked with creating a specialized student support services for nontraditional students, what would that look like and what would it entail?