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Self-Reported Factors Influencing the Retention of Non-Traditional Female Students at Lake Michigan College

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SELF-REPORTED FACTORS
INFLUENCING THE RETENTION OF
NON-TRADITIONAL FEMALE
STUDENTS AT
LAKE MICHIGAN COLLEGE

by

Nancy Lynn Johnson

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Nancy Lynn Johnson
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## DATA FORM
ABSTRACT

Many non-traditional female students enter post-secondary education by attending a community college. The vast majority of these adult women must simultaneously balance work, family, and educational priorities. Maintaining this tenuous balance is pivotal to persistence. This descriptive study discusses the reasons for delayed entry into post-secondary education by non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. It examines how life transitions later influence the decision to attend. Common barriers to persistence and factors supporting persistence are heard through the self-reported experiences of non-traditional female students attending this community college. Recommendations for programming and service delivery are made. Suggestions for further study are explored.
CHAPTER ONE: THESIS PROPOSAL

Problem Statement

Community colleges continue to be the primary open access institutions through which many non-traditional female students enter post-secondary education. Today, 58% of all community college students are women. Since the average community college student is now 29 years old, non-traditional women attending community college are certainly not alone (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). It has become increasingly important to recognize the factors and support services that assist in the enrollment, persistence, and retention of this growing segment of the community college population. In Michigan, recent reductions in state appropriations for higher education have caused community colleges to reassess personnel and programming. This reassessment highlights the need for institutions to have a clear understanding of what is pivotal to the persistence of this significant segment of the student population. This qualitative study will attempt to add to the overall body of knowledge concerning the retention of non-traditional female students attending community college and will specifically focus on persistence at Lake Michigan College (LMC), a community college in southwest Michigan.

Importance and Rationale of the Study

Current trends indicate that the number of young students enrolling in post-secondary education is growing more rapidly than the number of older students. Nonetheless, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that from 1999 to 2010 there will be a 14% increase in post-secondary enrollment for students
25 years of age and older. Between 1989 and 1999, the number of men enrolled in post-secondary institutions rose 5%, while the number of women increased 13% (NCES, 2001a). Many non-traditional female students enter post-secondary education by attending a community college. Nationally, the average age of a community college student is 29, and 58% of community college enrollees are women (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). The student population at Lake Michigan College correlates with national statistics. During 2001-2002, Lake Michigan College reported a total enrollment of 6,762 students. Of this number, 3,796 credit students were enrolled in programs of study. The student population was 57% female (Michigan Community College Network [MCCN], 2003b). The average age of a Lake Michigan College student is 29 (LMC, 1998).

While Lake Michigan College’s student population reflects national averages, its graduation rate varies. Nationally, 31% of community college students graduate with a certificate (13%) or an associate’s degree (18%) within five years (NCES, 1998). Lake Michigan College reported that 14.7% of a student cohort beginning in 1997-1998 graduated within four years (LMC, 2002a). However, this comparison may not tell the whole picture. NCES (2001c) also reported from a longitudinal study that 23.2% of students beginning at public two-year institutions in 1995-1996 completed an associate’s degree within six years. The 2002 Lake Michigan College Progress Report on the Assessment of Student Outcomes and Institutional Effectiveness states that historically, “It appears that at least 27.5% of any given Fall cohort will graduate within seven academic years” (LMC, 2002c, p. 25).
Accepting either graduation percentage, the consequences of the failure to retain students are as significant as the rewards associated with successful retention. The enrollment level of an institution is directly affected by its retention rate. Increasing persistence increases enrollment. For any institution, there is a corresponding monetary cost associated with attrition. In 2001-2002 Lake Michigan College had a Fall to Winter first year student retention rate of 63% (LMC, 2002b). Based on a tuition rate of $71 per credit hour (LMC, 2003a) the revenue gained by retaining one first year student after his or her first semester through graduation is approximately $3,500. By reducing the attrition rate by 100 students, Lake Michigan College could realize institutional income of $350,000, by 200 students $700,000.

"Although there are costs in retaining these additional students, such costs should not change materially the overall cost factor used by a college in setting its tuition rates" (Wild & Ebbers, 2002, p. 503). As more students persist, new students also reflect increased revenue for the institution as opposed to the replacement of income lost due to attrition.

While identifying factors assisting in the successful retention of non-traditional female students may prove to be financially beneficial to the institution, equally significant is the impact of educational attainment on this segment of the student population. The statistics that equate higher degrees with higher wages are well known. Generally, people holding a college degree earn more money than those possessing only a high school diploma. Sanchez, Laanan, and Wiseley (1999) report in a study of community colleges in California that certificate completers experienced
a 14% increase in income, while those earning associate’s degrees saw gains of 13%.

During the first three years after college, vocational students 25 years or older
experienced gains in income of 14%. Overall, community college graduates who
receive an associate’s degree earn 24% more than individuals whose highest level of
educational attainment is a high school diploma (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). For many
non-traditional female students the impact of this difference can immediately extend
beyond the individuals themselves to their families.

Everyone who begins the journey into higher education must take the critical
step of deciding when to attend. Once the decision to attend college has been made,
feeling part of and participating in the campus community may play a significant role
in persistence. Understanding the experiences of non-traditional female students can
strengthen the institution’s ability to proactively identify similar women, potentially
resulting in earlier enrollment and enhanced support as they complete their
educational goals.

Lake Michigan College’s motto, Changing minds, changing lives,
transforming the region, best expresses the institution’s commitment to individual
growth and the prosperity of the southwest Michigan/northern Indiana region. Lake
Michigan College’s ability to provide a supportive educational experience for its non-
traditional female students is important to its overall mission to provide to the
community students who demonstrate the advanced skills necessary to compete in the
job market and at transfer institutions.
Retention can impact the individual, the institution, and surrounding communities. This study will attempt to answer the following questions regarding the retention of non-traditional female students attending Lake Michigan College: (1) What factors delay entry into post-secondary education for non-traditional female students? (2) What factors later influence non-traditional female students to enroll in a community college? (3) What do non-traditional female students view as barriers to their persistence at a community college? (4) What supports the persistence of non-traditional female students attending a community college? (5) How can Lake Michigan College improve program and service delivery for non-traditional female students?

"An institution committed to student success must also be committed to student retention, for often the key to success for many students is mere persistence" (Sydow, 1998, p. 635). Answering these questions may assist in broadening the understanding of non-traditional female student persistence. It may assist in the review of current services and the manner of service delivery to this population. In view of reduced state appropriations it may also assist in providing a focus for both present and future programming at Lake Michigan College.

**Background of the Study**

Community colleges have seen a dramatic increase in the number of women students during the past four decades. The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics reports that of the 111,607 associate’s degrees awarded in 1965-1966, 43% were earned by women. In 1999-2000 those
figures rose to 564,933 associate’s degrees awarded with 60% earned by women. Projections show that by 2005-2006, 594,000 associate’s degrees will be awarded with 63% being earned by women (NCES, 2001b). Of all community college students, 32% are 30 years of age or older and 46% are 25 years of age or older (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). Not only is the percentage of women receiving degrees increasing, but it follows that a large number of these individuals are women over the age of 25, a population often referred to as non-traditional or re-entry female students.

Michigan’s first community college, Grand Rapids Junior College, was established in 1914. There are 28 public community colleges in Michigan. In 2000-2001, 417,422 students attended Michigan community colleges. Their average age was 29, and 60% of the students were female (Michigan Community College Association [MCCA], 2003). In 2001-2002, 19,637 degrees were awarded by Michigan community colleges. Sixty-four percent were awarded to women (MCCN, 2003).

Historically, women have not been the majority of higher education enrollees. Access and participation in higher education for women has been the result of both societal and economic influences. During colonial times, women were prepared for their societal role by learning from their mothers the skills they would need to take care of the home (Komives & Woodward, 1996). Society saw no need for women with formal learning. Following the Revolutionary War, changing economic circumstances began to influence the role of women as the production of goods shifted away from the home. A new role emerged for women giving them greater
responsibility for the nurturing and guidance of children. In 1821, advocating that women should not only be trained for duties in the home, but that their influence should also follow children into the schools, Emma Willard founded the Troy Female Seminary. Willard further advocated for parity in the education of women (Komives & Woodward).

Equal however, did not mean being educated with men. In the mid-nineteenth century women began to enter higher education through coordinated colleges which were separate bodies affiliated with men’s colleges or through female seminaries, a term used to designate these institutions as teachers’ colleges. It is estimated that by 1870, 11,000 women were enrolled in some kind of institution of higher education including teachers’ colleges, private seminaries or academies, or institutions offering baccalaureate degrees (Komives & Woodward, 1996). In 1833, Oberlin College in Ohio became the first institution to enroll both men and women, pioneering co-education (Gordon, 1990).

As greater numbers of women continued to seek higher education through increasingly diverse institutions, federal legislation influenced their future opportunities including those that would arise through the development of the community college system. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 created land grant colleges and paved the way for the funding of women’s colleges in the 1860’s and 1870’s (Gordon, 1990). The second Morrill Act of 1890 created historically black land grant institutions. Both of these Acts nurtured the concept of a collegiate
education for all at public expense and planted the seed for the contemporary concept of equal access (Komives & Woodward, 1996).

At the turn of the twentieth century, several events acted as catalysts for the creation of junior colleges, now generally called community colleges. Newly emerging research universities were less interested in undergraduate education and supported the creation of another tier between high school and the university. Concurrently, rapid industrial expansion and agricultural mechanization created the need for a better-trained work force. At the same time, the growth of high school graduates led to an increased demand for teachers and higher education. Increasingly, the public perceived schooling as an avenue of upward mobility and as a contributor to the community's wealth (Cohen & Brawer, 1982). The creation and development of community colleges was a giant step forward in opening institutions of higher education to a broader spectrum of individuals, breaking through class barriers (Komives & Woodward, 1996).

In 1901, Joliet Junior College, the oldest junior college in the nation, was founded under the influence of the President of the University of Chicago (Kartje, 2000). In 1915 there were 74 community colleges in the United States serving approximately 3000 students (Diener, 1986; Phillippe & Patton, 2000). In 1940, there were 575 community colleges. Today, this number has increased to 1,132 community colleges serving 10.4 million students with 5.4 million credit students and 5 million noncredit students (Phillippe & Patton).
Two unique federal actions would set the stage for this phenomenal growth in public community colleges. The first was the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill. The second was the 1947 report on higher education authorized by President Harry S. Truman (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The GI Bill provided financial assistance for veterans of World War II who wanted to pursue higher education. Many of the men and women attending college under the GI Bill were older students who brought a new, more mature outlook to the experience. While the GI Bill afforded access to many veterans who might otherwise not have attended college, the 1947 report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education recommended permanently expanding access and affordability. The report states in part, “Whatever form the community college takes…it will provide college education for the youth of the community certainly, so as to remove geographic and economic barriers to educational opportunity and discover and develop individual talents at low cost and easy access” (Diener, 1986, p. 132). The increased emphasis on community college education and the resulting financial support from federal and state governments altered the landscape of higher education forever. The time period between 1950 and 1970 has been described as the golden age for community colleges (Komives & Woodward, 1996).

It is against this backdrop that Lake Michigan College, a two-year, public co-educational community college was established. Located in Berrien County, in the southwest corner of Michigan, Lake Michigan College opened in 1946 as Benton Harbor Junior College. Its primary function was to provide high school graduates
with local access to a traditional liberal arts curriculum. Sixty-one students attended classes (LMC, 1998).

Enrollment expanded, and in 1963 there were 750 daytime students (LMC, 1998). Two decades later, Fall enrollment for 1983-1984 reached 3,359 students with 59% being female (LMC, 1983). The student population and the college’s physical facilities continued to grow. In 1998, a full-service campus building known as the Bertrand Crossing Campus opened in Niles, Michigan. In 2000, M-TEC at Lake Michigan College, a campus dedicated to industrial technology, opened in a state enterprise zone in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Currently under construction and scheduled to open Fall 2003, is a full-service campus building located in South Haven, Michigan (LMC, 2002d).

In 2001-2002 Lake Michigan College reported a total enrollment of 6,762 students (MCCN, 2003b). Of that total, 3,796 were program students and 57% were female (MCCN, 2003c). In 2001-2002, Lake Michigan College awarded 273 degrees with 61% earned by women. (MCCN, 2003a). During Winter 2003 semester, 37% of the female students attending Lake Michigan College were 26-45 years of age (LMC, 2003b).

Community colleges are the primary institutions offering open access admission to post-secondary education. "Community colleges break through class barriers and truly provide higher education opportunities for everyone, including those with vocational interests, those seeking a terminal degree at a community college, and those seeking enrollment in two-plus-two programs with local colleges."

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and universities” (Komives & Woodward, 1996, p.54). The statistical profile of community college students nationally and at Lake Michigan College shows that student populations have dramatically increased over the last 40 years. Further, a significant segment of this population is female and over 25 years of age. Future projections on degree attainment indicate that by 2005-2006, 63% of all associate degrees will be awarded to women students (NCES, 2001b). While numbers paint a statistical picture of the older, female student population they do not speak to the experiences non-traditional women have as they make the choice to enroll and then persist toward completion of their community college degree. This study will attempt to look at those experiences for non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College.

Statement of Purpose

This study will attempt to identify and describe the primary factors that influence the persistence of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. It will explore the reasons for delayed entry into post-secondary education by a group of 10 non-traditional female students. It will look at the factors articulated by these women that influenced their decision to enroll at Lake Michigan College. It will explore the barriers and supports that non-traditional female students view as pivotal to their persistence. Recommendations for programming and modification of services will be discussed as suggested by the participants and as concluded from this study.
Definition of Terms

Non-traditional female student. “Non-traditional student” is a term that has been used to describe older, minority, part-time, low-income, or women students. It has also been used to describe students who enter post-secondary education after the normal ages of 18-22. In this study, non-traditional female student is defined as a woman who first enrolled at Lake Michigan College at 23 years of age or older and for whom Lake Michigan College is the first post-secondary institution attended.

Retention. In this study, retention refers to the institutional perspective of retaining a student until she graduates.

Persistence. In this study, persistence means a student continuing in a course of action (working toward a degree), the result of which is institutional retention.

Adult Learner. Adult learner is a term generally used to describe students taking college credit courses who are over 25 years of age. This definition is applied in this study.

Goals and Objectives

This study has three goals. The first goal is to add to the overall body of knowledge concerning the persistence of non-traditional female students attending community college. Second, this study will provide descriptive information on the experiences and opinions of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College to assist the institution in providing programming or services targeted toward the retention of this population. Finally, it is the goal of this study to improve campus climate and sensitivity to the needs of the non-traditional female population by
providing information on the barriers and supports at Lake Michigan College as viewed by these women.

This study has five objectives. The first objective is to identify those factors that delayed the entry into post-secondary education of these study participants. The second objective is to identify those factors that influenced the enrollment of these non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. The third objective is to identify those factors that have assisted and continue to aid in their persistence. The fourth objective is to identify any barriers which these women feel have hindered their persistence. The fifth objective is to elicit from these women suggestions for programming and service modification that will enable Lake Michigan College to effectively support and retain the non-traditional female population both now and in the future.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. Most notably, the participants in this study are a non-random population. The study participants were identified through their affiliation with the Lake Michigan College Student Support Services program. The Student Support Services program is part of the federal TRIO programs and is specifically targeted to assist first generation college students, those with limited income, or students with a disability. Because these students are motivated to participate in a support program, they may not be representative of a random population of non-traditional female students, but may represent those who are more highly motivated. Second, the author of this study is the Director of Student
Support Services at Lake Michigan College and though due care and diligence have been taken to provide impartial observation and discussion, bias can occur. Third, the results of this study are not meant to reflect any other population at Lake Michigan College. Fourth, the findings of this study are specific to Lake Michigan College and may not reflect other institutions nor be transferable to them.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Retention of non-traditional female students will be explored in the context of three distinct yet interrelated areas: a model of student departure, adult learning theory, and women's developmental theory. Discussion regarding the student model of departure will include its applicability to community colleges. The discussion of adult learner and women's developmental theory will focus on characteristics of adult women that may influence persistence. This chapter concludes with the review of an adult women's enrollment survey completed by Lake Michigan College in 1996.

Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure

Constructs

Theory concerning the retention of students in higher education can be drawn from a variety of perspectives including psychological, environmental, sociological, structural-functional, economic, and organizational sociology. One of the primary models for studying retention involves Tinto’s (1993) work concerning academic and social integration.

Tinto (1993) proposes a longitudinal model of institutional departure. His model argues that an individual's departure from an institution is the result of longitudinal interactions between the individual and members of the academic and social systems of the institution. He suggests that an individual brings differing skills, abilities, family background, educational experiences, intentions, and commitments to the educational setting. He contends that experiences within the institution, primarily
those arising out of interactions between the individual and other members of the college, students, staff, and faculty are centrally related to persistence at the institution. Academic and social integration modifies the individual’s intentions, goal of college completion, and commitment to the institution. Additionally, the degree to which an individual participates in communities outside of the college, such as family, work, and community, as well as, events in those communities, shapes persistence. Tinto suggests that external commitments may operate in a manner largely independent of the internal workings of the institution, which leaves open the possibility that an individual may not persist even when experiences within the college are largely positive.

Applicability of Tinto’s Model to Community College

Typically, Tinto’s (1993) model has been applied to traditional college populations attending residential campuses. Applications to adult and community college populations are few; scarcer still are applications to adult women students attending community college. Existing studies show contradictory results concerning application to community college populations. The application of Tinto’s model to community college populations continues to be tested by researchers, including Tinto (1997).

Napoli and Wortman (1998) assessed the role and relative importance of each of Tinto’s constructs applied to a population of 1,011 first-time freshman students enrolled on the three campuses of Suffolk Community College in New York. Their results appear to confirm the validity of applying Tinto’s model to two-year
community college populations with 89% of the actual persistence/withdrawal outcomes correctly identified by the model.

Goldsmith and Archambault (1997) surveyed 306 adult women students, 25 years of age or older at the time they entered college, who werepersisters and non-persisters at a large community-technical college in the northeast. One initial finding, that a student's final goal was very important to her persistence, supported Tinto's model. Other findings related to academic and social integration, did not. Social integration for persisters and non-persisters was low. Neither group spent much time with faculty outside of class or with study groups, nor did they socialize or attend college events. For both groups academic integration was high. Further, both women persisters and non-persisters reported receiving external support. Goldsmith and Archambault found Tinto's theory inadequate in explaining persistence in adult women.

Academic Integration

In the multivariate model proposed by Tinto (1993) academic and social integration are connected to effective persistence. While social integration influences persistence, academic integration which includes class attendance, studying, and a minimum grade point average, is critical for it. Liu and Liu (1999) concluded from their study of students attending a commuter campus that student-faculty relationships are often crucial to student retention. Student-faculty relationships include informal student contact, such as discussion during office hours, in addition to formal classroom interaction.
In a six year study to distinguish factors between students who persisted at an institution that served mainly commuter students and those who dropped out, Johnson (1997) found that while both groups agreed the institution provided a good climate for learning and that the academic experience was positive, students who had closer contact with faculty were the successful or retained ones. Johnson characterized this contact as the student's perception of the adequacy of opportunity for interaction with faculty and the ease students felt in getting their questions answered. Johnson also found that males agreed more strongly then females that it was easy to have educational questions answered and that males had higher persistence rates than females.

Fishback and Polson (1998) in a study of the cognitive development of adult undergraduate students echoed the findings concerning the importance of faculty interaction, reporting that adult students stated that interaction with faculty and other students was vital to their learning and that they learned more from others than from books. Further, adult learners were facilitated by an environment that was dialogic, challenging, and supportive (Fishback & Polson).

Napoli and Wortman (1998) found that older students experience greater academic integration than younger students and that females evidence greater academic integration than males, in contrast to the 1997 study completed by Johnson. The more academically integrated students had higher academic achievement and stronger initial goal and institutional commitment that positively influenced persistence. Older students displayed the greatest institutional commitment, possibly
due to their limited ability to attend other colleges. Overall, academic and social integration had direct and indirect effects on persistence. Negative school events inhibited integration and had the largest direct influence on the likelihood of persistence. Also of interest is their finding that contrary to expectations, individuals with greater negative external life events experienced greater academic integration.

Social Integration

Tinto (1993, 1997) emphasizes the importance of social integration to persistence. Studies of community college students have shown little involvement in campus activities or campus organizations and minimal peer socialization. Hagedorn (2000), in a study of 22,000 community college students, found that over one-half never participated in activities with other students. Maxwell (2000) confirms these findings, but also states that for community college students peer interactions do not revolve around campus activities. Rather, this interaction centers around college coursework including studying together, discussing coursework, or talking in a student center or elsewhere on campus. Tinto (1997) suggests that social and academic systems for community college students are interrelated. He states that social communities emerge out of classroom academic activities and that the sphere of activities in the classroom is also social in character. For community college students the mosaic of relationships is again anchored in the classroom (Maxwell, 2000).
External Commitments and Communities

Outside of the classroom, community college students are faced with the demands of adjusting to college and external commitments. The external demands of family and work can have a significant negative impact on persistence. Hoffman and Elias (1999) found that students halt their studies during times of crisis such as caring for a family member or job loss. Large financial expenditures, such as a house, a car, spouse’s tuition, or divorce settlement can also cause students to “stop-out” for a period of time.

In a similar study conducted at Mountain Empire Community College, students cited two predominant and conflicting commitments as reasons for discontinuing classes: work and family (Sydow, 1998). For adult women students, the double or triple stressors associated with family, job, and school often challenge their coping and time management skills. For many the easier choice when confronted with multiple demands for their time and energy is often to give up their educational goals (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

External commitments or communities can also serve as a primary source of support enhancing persistence for some community college students. Greenberg (1999) found that external encouragement and family support have the greatest influence on the retention of adult students between the ages of 34 and 55. Sources of this support vary, as does the nature of the support. Married students report the support of their spouse to be most significant. This includes financial, moral, and task related support, such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, and shopping. Greenberg
found children to be the second most significant source of support and encouragement for married students and the most important for divorced or single parents. Support from children ranges from helping with household tasks and taking care of siblings to providing encouragement.

An Alternate View of Retention

In contrast to these studies, Wyman (1997) in a study of the 16 colleges making up the South Carolina Technical College System examined student retention from the institution’s point of view rather than the student’s. Wyman found that first-year retention rates appear to be more determined by conditions external to the domain of the college at the time of admission than by conditions students are exposed to during the first year of college. External conditions include, but are not limited to, factors like regional employment and government fiscal policy. Wyman stated that a college which serves a region of high employment per capita should be expected to enjoy higher retention rates than a college that serves a region of low employment per capita. To increase retention rates, Wyman suggests that colleges secure appropriations sufficient to increase or formulate budgets so that per student spending on instruction and academic support increases at a faster rate than the growth of regional mean income. Wyman also found that that while retention rates varied considerably across the colleges from a low of 36% to a high of 60%, they varied only slightly across time for each college. Wyman suggests the degree to which an institution can change its retention rate may be limited or locked into a retention rate range.
Persister and Non-persister Student Profile

Profiling community college students, Phillippe and Patton (2000) report that of the approximately 5.4 million students attending community college, 32% are 30 years of age or older, and 46% are 25 years of age or older. Nearly two-thirds of community college students attend less than full-time. Fifty percent of all community college students work full-time; more than 80% work part-time or full-time.

Profiling the persister, Windham (1994) found that the community college student most likely to persist is young, a high school graduate, probably entering college directly out of high school, attending college full-time, making good grades and not working full-time or taking transitional studies classes the first semester. The student least likely to persist is older when he or she starts college, works full-time, attends college part-time, and takes transitional studies courses. Given that the later profile has become the majority student at most community colleges and that 58% of community college students are women (Phillippe & Patton, 2000) a closer look at the persistence of adult women students is important.

Adult Women as Learners

Understanding the college experience of adult women necessitates an understanding of the literature regarding the development of this segment of the student population. This literature appears to be drawn from two primary areas: adult learning theory and women's developmental theory.
Adults as Learners

Adult Learner Profile

While no two individual adult learners are exactly the same, themes among this varied group called adult learners have been identified. Adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent (Cross, 1981). Many adults prefer a participatory and proactive process of self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1989). They identify the classroom as the focus of their learning and the crossroad where social and academic experience meet (Kasworm, 2003; Tinto, 1993, 1997).

Classroom interactions are critical in determining how well new knowledge is incorporated by the adult. Adult students feel that meaning is enhanced when instructors take a learner centered approach by recognizing and facilitating the integration of the student’s real life experiences with course content, either through classroom engagement or applied learning activities such as case study projects (Fishback & Polson, 1998; Kasworm, 2003). For underprepared adults, learner centered classrooms result in higher grades, a greater sense of accomplishment, and greater overall satisfaction (Miglietti & Strange, 1998).

Adult students are busy people, balancing family, work and school environments. Interruption of the educational process or stopping-out is not uncommon and most frequently is related to family or job conflicts (Hoffman & Elias, 1999). The convenience of course delivery leads many busy adults to elect program delivery via distance education including telecourses, interactive television,
and internet delivery. Adult women participants in these courses indicate that course quality depends more on the teacher than how the class is delivered (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001). Adults view faculty relationships as key to their academic success, rather than peer interaction, campus experiences, or method of course delivery (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann; Tinto, 1993, 1997).

The Voice of Adult Learners

Kasworm (2003) states that adult undergraduate students often view learning in terms of two types of knowledge - academic and real world. Academic knowledge is knowledge gained from books and in the classroom. Real world knowledge is knowledge that is immediately applicable to life or daily actions or that is learned from doing. In a study of 90 undergraduate students between the ages of 30–59, Kasworm identified five knowledge voices which correlate with adult learning views: entry voice, outside voice, cynical voice, straddling voice, and inclusion voice.

Entry voice students view college culture as confusing and perceive faculty as all knowing and powerful individuals who will dictate the knowledge to be learned and how to learn it. Students with this belief structure feel their previous knowledge or expertise is unrelated to class content. In-class relationships with faculty members including eye contact, acknowledgment and respect of their adult status, faculty knowledge of the student’s name and work or family situation, and positive feedback are important to entry voice students. Entry voice is not limited to new students. It may also be expressed when adults begin a new course which is cognitively or emotionally demanding (Kasworm, 2003).
Outside voice students have a belief structure anchored in knowledge outside of college that may include work, family, or personal life. Their adult world of work and life are tenuously connected to their college life. Academic content is continuously screened for relevance and importance to real world application. These students value faculty members who engage them in dialogue to connect their real world experience to class content. Absent the instructor initiating this engagement, most remain silent (Kaseworm, 2003).

Cynical voice adult learners are those individuals who view academic learning as a faculty-student game. This voice is predominantly found in re-entry students who attend college to alleviate work or family pressures to get a degree. They rarely attempt to make meaning of the classroom experience (Kaseworm, 2003).

Adult learners with a straddling voice are those who make connections between their academic and real world and integrate their knowledge. Active, collaborative and applied instructional strategies including self-directed projects crossing both worlds are valued. These students report faculty, in class peers, and external individuals, such as coworkers who have been or are students in a similar major or area of study, as sources of support (Kaseworm, 2003).

Inclusion voice adults seek intellectual immersion in the academic world and cogently articulate the intertwining of knowledge from each facet of their lives. These adults integrate thought and action across their life roles and generate new knowledge outside of course content. Faculty are viewed as co-learners, valued
resource experts, and partners in learning. Education is seen as a life-long learning process (Kasworm, 2003).

Connections are evident between the adult learner voices suggested by Kasworm (2003) and those described in women’s developmental theory.

**Women as Learners**

**Women’s Ways of Knowing**

Building on the work of Gilligan (1982), who initially depicted the woman’s voice, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) explain how women frequently use the metaphor of voice to describe their intellectual and ethical development. Belenky et al. (1986) found that a woman’s self-worth, sense of voice, and mind were “intricately intertwined” (p. 18), and that an individual’s self-description was related to broader themes in the way women think. Five perspectives from which women know and view the world were developed: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge.

“Silent women have little awareness of their intellectual capabilities” (Belenky et al., p 134). Women in silence experience themselves as powerless and subject to external authority. They have limited experience and confidence in their own ability to find meaning.

Believing all knowledge originates outside of them, women in the received knowledge perspective are not able to create new ideas or develop their own insights. Learning relies upon listening to others (Belenky et. al., 1986).
Subjective knowing describes women who consider their inner knowledge as superior and use intuition as their guide. Almost half of the women studied by Belenky et al. were considered to be predominately subjective knowers. “Women at this position usually feel strongly that they ‘know’ but have few tools for expressing themselves or persuading others to listen” (Belenky et al., p. 134).

Procedural knowers analyze and interpret the world in an objective way. Two forms of knowing are identified: separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowing focuses on judging others’ positions through analysis and critical thinking. Connected knowing focuses on suspending judgment while listening and developing an understanding of the other’s position (Belenky et al., 1986).

Constructed knowers are women who integrate subjective and objective knowledge, weaving together emotional and rational thought in the acquisition of knowledge. “Constructivist women aspire to work that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others” (Belenky et al., p. 152).

Women’s Lifestyle Development

Levinson and Levinson (1996) also looked at women’s development. They explain that a life cycle of events applies to women. This life cycle develops as a sequence of interactions characterized by periods of learning and periods of transition that result in growth and change. For women, these interactions are influenced by societal expectations and the historical roles played by women. One aspect of Levinson and Levinson’s work is the description of the Dream, which gives meaning
to a woman’s life and motivates her. Levinson and Levinson explain that women may renounce this Dream, temporarily or permanently, in order to pursue more pragmatic goals favored by family and the social world. This self-limitation may suggest a reason for the numbers of women now entering community college at non-traditional ages (Kartje, 2000).

Understanding the enrollment and persistence of adult women students in college necessitates a view through the multiple lenses of a model of student persistence, the manner in which adult students view and construct knowledge, the development of women’s ways of knowing, and their dream. Application of each lens provides a progressively clearer focus of the process of persistence for adult women students.

**Non-traditional Female Student Persistence at Community Colleges**

**Adult Women Students**

In 1906, evolutionist David Starr Jordan, President of Stanford University responded to skeptics by stating, “If the college woman is a mistake, Nature will eliminate her” (as cited in Soloman, 1985, p. 207). Almost a century later, women represent 55% of all undergraduate students and almost 58% of the community college population (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). With 44% of adult women students attending community college reported to be 25-49 years of age, questions concerning these women are being given greater study (Phillippe & Patton, 2000; White, 2002). Who are these women? What motivates them to enter higher education? What impacts their persistence? How can two-year institutions enhance the educational
experience for these women?

Adult female students attending community college are a heterogeneous group. Generally viewed as students 25 years of age or older (Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997; Greenberg, 1999; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001), these women may be married, single, or divorced. They may be childless, have children in the home, or be empty nesters. Most work at least part-time; many work full-time. They may also attend college full-time, although most attend part-time. For many, the blending of work, school, and family can be particularly challenging. Today, they are more racially diverse with increasing enrollments of African-American women and students of Hispanic origin. Many of these women are also first-generation college students, which often brings additional challenges (Bax, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower; Thomas, 2001).

For adult women students, college persistence like college departure, is in many respects a personal event that can only be fully comprehended by looking at and understanding the experiences of each individual. Still, research suggests there are common threads.

Motivation

Adult women who do not enter higher education immediately after high school indicate caring for children as the single most important reason for non-entry (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1999). For adult women the decision to pursue a college education is often made within the context of a significant life event. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bowers (2000) found that the "loss of a
job, divorce, the death of a spouse, and career limitations due to lack of education” (p. 291) were motivating factors in the decision to attend college. Gaining job related skills to enter the work force, working to improve a current job situation, or changing career goals also motivates adult women to attend college. Children were viewed as a strong motivation for attending college. Children influenced the desire of women to improve their chances in life for themselves and their families. Many persist in college with the hope that their example will motivate their children to do the same (AAUW, 1999; Shaw & Coleman, 2000; Thomas, 2001).

Goals

Tinto (1993) discussed the positive relationship between student goals and student persistence. He also emphasized the importance of academic and social integration in conjunction with a student’s collegiate experiences in influencing goal development and persistence. Goldsmith and Archambault (1997) in a study of the persistence of 307 adult women at a community college found that the adult community college women who persisted had a goal of attaining an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Non-persisters most frequently expressed a goal of getting a certificate or transferring to another community or technical college. Further, persisters who redefined their goals usually raised their expectations, while non-persisters’ goals remained the same or were lowered. Students who changed their goal upward were found to have higher social integration (Goldsmith & Archambault).
While entering college is a conscious decision made with the belief that a college education is an essential step to life changes, women who persist toward a career goal also hold education itself or improving their general knowledge as a goal. Most view this not only as an economic decision, but also as a personal decision intertwined with issues of their own self-esteem (Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997; Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001).

Fear of Failure

"Many women enter higher education with the fear of failure nipping at their heels" (Miller, 2000, p. 66). For adult women students this fear is most readily articulated in four areas: failure to succeed in an educational environment, concern about competing with younger students, apprehension about how or if they will fit in with the college population, and worry about juggling family, work and educational responsibilities (AAUW, 1999; Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997; Greenberg, 1999; Miller).

A Mosaic of Academic and Social Integration

During the first semester and in subsequent semesters, several distinct areas of academic importance are defined by adult women as promoting their persistence. These include the importance of part-time attendance, study skills classes, engaged faculty relationships, and expanded, more flexible course delivery, such as telecourses and weekend classes (AAUW, 1999; Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001). Faculty engagement is most frequently viewed as classroom contact including “pep talks” affirming the student’s ability. Some African-American women report the
presence of African-American community college faculty as essential to their upward educational mobility (Shaw & Coleman, 2000).

Miller (2000) reported that the presence of a strong counseling and support network for reentry females was vital to their academic success. Additionally, first semester academic achievement and institutional support have been shown to bolster self-confidence and assist in validating the student's capabilities (Greenberg, 1999; Miller, Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001). When asked to express in their own words the single most positive aspect of returning to school, adult women's comments centered around improved self-esteem, self-image, and self-efficacy (Thomas, 2001).

Hagedom, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, and Fillpot (2000) and Maxwell (2000) stated that community college women tend to attain higher levels of informal social integration than men. Women also express less difficulty in making friends and were much more likely to form study groups or meet with another student to study. In concurrence, Shank, Winchell, and Myers (2001) found that adult women place greater value on student support groups. Williams (1997) also found that for adult women a peer group that provides comprehensive social support throughout their course of study is crucial to maintaining morale and motivation. Women value knowledgeable academic advising, seek more guidance on career counseling, and want more user-friendly information about financial aid including more accessible processes for securing loans and aid (AAUW, 1999; Shank, Winchell, & Myers, 2001).
Barriers to Persistence

Time constraints related to juggling family and work with educational responsibilities can create a barrier to persistence. Women typically explain how they try to align their lives and employment to the existing structure of the college and their family norms, rather than envisioning how educational and family structure might be made more compatible with their needs and schedules (AAUW, 1999). Adult women are much more likely to stop-out a semester or longer when conflict exists in one or more of these areas (Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001; Thomas, 2001). Early identification of stressful circumstances and suggestions for coping are important for adult women students. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) report that parenting and childcare responsibilities are critical stress generating issues for adult women students. Also of interest is the finding that basic childcare is less of a problem than the need for exceptional childcare, as in the case of a sick child (AAUW).

Health concerns are also a significant source of stress, with students between the ages of 25-39 reporting more stress about health related matters than women over 40. Stress management workshops are reported as important to women students trying to maintain a sense of balance in their lives (Bax, 1998).

Family resistance or protest is another barrier to persistence. It can take the form of overt verbal statements attacking the student’s ability or may be heard as subtle complaints regarding time away from family, time spent on homework, or concerns about the sharing of responsibilities. For African-American women, non-
supportive family members erect more serious roadblocks to persistence than the lack of any other social support (Shaw & Coleman, 2000).

Lake Michigan College Adult Women Survey

In July 1996, based on a declining enrollment in adult women students, Lake Michigan College conducted a focus group with ten women between the ages of 25-40. Sixty percent of the focus group participants were married. Seventy percent were employed fulltime. One of the primary reasons women identified for not returning to college was keeping up with their current workload of career and family. Respondents continually emphasized the importance of a good counselor or advocate who would assist them in making a personal connection to the college (LMC, 1997).

In November 1996, an enrollment survey involving women between the ages of 25-49 was also conducted. Forty women responded to the survey. The majority of survey respondents were married, in their thirties, with three or fewer children at home. Seventy percent worked part-time or full-time. Over half of the respondents listed family obligations and not enough time as the primary reasons they did not attend college. Over 50% of the women indicated they would be interested in exploring career options with a counselor or attending a financial aid workshop (LMC, 1997).

Summary and Conclusion

A review of the literature concerning the persistence of non-traditional female students should not be undertaken with a narrow field of vision. Adult female persisters are simultaneously adult learners and women in different developmental
stages. Each individual brings to the college experience a complex set of variables which, along with the degree of academic and social integration, may influence persistence. Persistence for most non-traditional female students involves the juggling of family, work, and school responsibilities. Influences outside the college, such as family, spouses, and children may act as barriers or supports to persistence. As adult women continue to pursue their dream through the open access portal of community college, institutions must check the pulse of their own commitment to this significant segment of the student population. What better way to do so than by listening to the non-traditional female students who are the voices of this experience.
CHAPTER THREE: THESIS DESCRIPTION

Introduction

This study identifies and describes the primary factors assisting in the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. This study focuses on the following questions:

1. What factors delay entry into post-secondary education for non-traditional female students?

2. What factors later influence non-traditional female students to enroll in a community college?

3. What do non-traditional female students view as barriers to their persistence at a community college?

4. What supports the persistence of non-traditional female students attending a community college?

5. How can Lake Michigan College improve program and service delivery for non-traditional female students?

This chapter details and synthesizes the enrollment and persistence experiences of 10 non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. A discussion of supportive programming and service delivery as suggested by the participants and as concluded from this study is included.

Chapter three is organized as follows: subjects, design of study, results, analysis of study, conclusion, and plan for dissemination.
Subjects

Seventeen potential participants were identified through their affiliation with the Student Support Services or Single-Parent Homemaker programs at Lake Michigan College. Each potential participant was contacted by telephone and advised of this study. Ten female students agreed to participate.

For the purpose of this study, non-traditional female student was defined as a female who first enrolled at Lake Michigan College at 23 years of age or older and for whom Lake Michigan College was the first post-secondary institution attended. All students selected had enrolled at Lake Michigan College for a minimum of two semesters.

Although the parameters of this study were provided to each student prior to the individual interviews, it was revealed during the interviews that three of the women attended college shortly after high school. Two attended community colleges for one year or less and did not return until their subsequent enrollment at Lake Michigan College. Of the three women, two enrolled at Lake Michigan College 15 years after their first college attempt and one 25 years later. Given the brevity of the initial enrollment, and the length of time between the first college attempt and subsequent enrollment at Lake Michigan College, these women were retained in this study.

Each participant in the study completed a Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix D). The following self-reported information taken from the Demographic Questionnaire is provided to give a better understanding of these women.
The women in this study were ethnically diverse. Three identified themselves as Black or African American, one as Hispanic, one as Multi-racial, and five as White.

Seven of the 10 women did not attend college prior to enrolling at Lake Michigan College. The age at enrollment for these seven ranged from 25-46, with an average age of 34. Three women enrolled in college shortly after high school, left college, and then re-enrolled 15 to 25 years later. These three women ranged in age at their re-enrollment from 35-44. The average age at re-enrollment was 38. Currently, all 10 women range in age from 30-47, with an average age of 39.

Nine of the women had a high school diploma and one a general education diploma. Five were sophomores and five were freshman. Their degree fields included accounting, social work, computer information systems, occupational therapy assistant, counseling, licensed practical nurse, and registered nurse.

One woman currently attends school fulltime, which is defined as 12 credit hours or more. One attends school three-quarter time, and eight attend school part-time (defined as six credit hours or less). Two work full-time, one works three-quarter time, five work part-time at 20 hours per week or less, and two are not currently employed. Overall, 80% of the women attend school part-time, and 80% work part-time or more.

Four are married, three are divorced, one is separated, and one is single. All have children. Two have children who are currently in college. The remainder have children living in the home who range in age from 5-18.
In addition to work, family, and college, many of these women are involved in their local community through church, children’s activities, or volunteering. Eighty percent of the women reported regular participation in community activities. Most reported being less involved on campus with 40% reporting no involvement in campus clubs, activities, or groups.

Overall, the adult women students participating in this study are between the ages of 30-47 and ethnically diverse. They all have children, the majority of whom are still in the home. They are fairly evenly divided between married and unmarried. Eighty percent work at least part-time and attend school part-time. They are involved in their communities, but less involved on campus. They are goal oriented and most see an associate degree as the beginning rather than the end of their educational plan.

**Design of the Study**

This descriptive study began with the non-random selection of 17 adult women students identified through their affiliation with the Student Support Services or Single-Parent Homemaker programs at Lake Michigan College. Each potential participant was contacted by telephone and advised of the nature of this study. Initially, 14 students agreed to participate, one declined, and through telephone contact it was ascertained that two others did not meet the criteria for the study. An individual interview appointment was scheduled with the 14 interested students. Four did not show up and later declined to participate. Ten adult women students were individually interviewed. The interviews and data collection occurred during March and April 2003.
Before each interview the nature of the study was again verbally reviewed. Each participant was given a written letter of explanation which included a consent and release of information statement (see Appendix C). Each participant in this study gave written consent. This consent included permission to access the student’s record to verify her age at time of enrollment, that Lake Michigan College was the first post-secondary school attended, and that at least two semesters had been completed. Lake Michigan College granted permission for this study to be conducted and agreed to allow access to individual student records with the prior written permission of each student (see Appendix B).

This researcher has retained the signed originals so that these women might remain anonymous. All names used in reporting the results of this study have been changed. Each participant then completed a Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix D) and was individually interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio taped for later transcription. Participants were asked the same questions, in the same order as detailed on the Interview Questions form (see Appendix E).

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to complete a Check List of Services and Programs (see Appendix F). This form details a variety of programs, services, and individuals within the college community. Each participant was asked to check those areas they had used while attending Lake Michigan College and to rate whether the experience had been positive, negative, or neutral. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to attend a focus group session with the
other women who were participating in the study. Four women declined, citing work conflicts. Six others indicated an interest.

Scheduling a mutually convenient time to hold this focus group session became more problematic than anticipated due to the multiple time constraints and the schedules of the six women and this researcher. After several attempts to have at least three women present proved unsuccessful, a decision was made to forgo this focus group session.

The individual interviews were transcribed. Participants' individual answers were compiled and color-coded as to responder under the specific interview question. Similarities, differences, and theme patterns in responses were evaluated. Questions were grouped and responses analyzed for patterns and discrepancies in pattern in three different ways. The questions and responses were first reviewed in the same sequence as they had been asked in the interviews. They were then reviewed by grouping questions with similar context in a historical progression. Finally, they were reviewed by major theme.

The self-reported information from the Demographic Questionnaire was categorized and reduced to a table of characteristics analyzed for each individual and the group as a whole. The Check List was reduced to a single compilation of the number and type of response to each item. The self-reported information from the Demographic Questionnaire and the Check List were reviewed along with the analysis of the individual interviews. It is from this data and through this analysis that the following results are discussed.
Results of the Study

All quotes from the adult women participants reported hereafter are the product of each individual interview conducted by this researcher in March or April 2003. This researcher has retained all transcribed material. The real names of the participants have not been used in reporting these results. In reporting factors that delayed entry, only the responses of the seven students who did not attend college immediately following high school have been considered.

Factors that Delayed Entry

The seven non-traditional female students who did not enter college immediately after high school differed in their academic and social high school self-descriptions. Table 1 details the non-traditional female students' high school self-descriptions.

Most of the women indicated they considered attending college following high school, but had a stronger desire to be a wife and have their own home. Five of the women married shortly after high school. In addition to marriage, other factors reported as delaying entry to college included work and children. Denice, who at high school graduation was a single parent with two children stated, “I was encouraged by my older sister to attend college... it was just that I had my kids and I couldn't do what I wanted to do.” Fifty-seven percent of the women were neither encouraged nor discouraged from attending college. Sandi, who was discouraged from attending college stated,
I did not have good self-esteem. No one in my family went to college.

Mentally, I was discouraged. My grandmother told me I was not good enough to get good grades and that I would never make it.

Barb stated that she was emancipated at 15, attended an alternative education school, and worked. Regarding college Barb stated, "I never even thought about it." Two participants indicated they also did not know how they would pay for college.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Worked during high school</th>
<th>College attendance encouraged or discouraged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandi</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Discouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Not active</td>
<td>Yes - p/t</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>Yes - p/t</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denice</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Not active</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>30-40 hrs/wk</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>Yes - p/t</td>
<td>Neither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Not active</td>
<td>Yes - p/t</td>
<td>Encouraged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: p/t = part-time; hrs/wk = hours per week

When asked under what circumstances they would have attended college immediately after high school, a variety of reasons were stated including greater family support, no children, and financial assistance. Forty-two percent indicated under no circumstances would they have attended. Faith expressed the feelings of several others when she stated, "It wasn't a priority at the time."
In looking at the three women who attended college immediately after high school, only one major difference was readily apparent. Each of these women described herself as a good student in high school.

In deciding whether to enter college, it appears that a lack of encouragement was not viewed as a strong factor in the decision-making process for most of these women. Rather they viewed the decision as one of priorities. For those living on their own or with children, the priority was working and raising their children. For those who married, college and marriage were seen as mutually exclusive. For one first generation college student, a lack of family support did contribute to delayed entry.

Factors That Later Influenced Entry

The results that follow are addressed by looking at all 10 women participants, as common themes emerged whether the women were first time college enrollees or returning to college after an absence of 15 - 25 years.

Motivation

Life transitions and/or the desire for a better job were stated by every woman in this study as strong influences for attending college as non-traditional female students. Divorce or children leaving home for college were transition events described by four women. Sandi explained, "Both daughters were adults and the youngest was going into college. I started to think about what I wanted to do with my life and mostly I just wanted to know who I was, what possibilities were out there, finding life's purpose." Selene stated, "My daughters graduated from community
college and were going away to college and now that they were set, I figured it was
time for me. I am not being selfish...I think it was my time.”

Life transitions took other forms. For Denice, learning to drive at age 29
coupled with her youngest child attending first grade, motivated her to attend college.
She stated, “I got my driver’s license. My baby, he went into first grade and I was
like, I am going to school and I did.”

Others viewed low-paying jobs or job limitation as motivation. Faith
described this stating, “I want to do something with myself that is better than a $6.75
per hour job, standing on my feet all day long and not getting any appreciation for
it.” Barb indicated, “I was tired of working six months here and six months there,
knowing I was never going to get anywhere.” Supporting this Denice said, “I was
working two part-time jobs and I wanted to get a better education and I wanted to
have more for me and my kids.” Regarding job limitation, Gwen indicated, “I got
bored with just being a clerical person; I would like a trade.” Jamie voiced a desire
for career advancement stating, “I wanted a better career, more of a career, more
out of life, and college was the way to accomplish that.”

Life transitions and better employment opportunities were not the exclusive
influences on the decision to attend college. Fifty percent of the women cited the
influence of one or more individuals, most frequently friends or children. Friends
who worked at the college, worked in an occupation in which the participant was
interested, neighbors, or co-workers encouraged enrollment.
Children also influenced enrollment. Describing the influence of older children Selene stated, "My daughters said, 'Mama, we remember when you took us to our first day of school and now we're going to do the reverse.' I thought it was funny, but it was also very encouraging."

Others stated the biggest additional influence was self-motivation. Barb stated, "Pretty much I just woke up one morning and said this is the day. I describe it as a hammer right between the eyes." Faith described her desire to be a nurse, "I had a desire to become a nurse since I was 14 and basically, it has been 20 years since I have been in school and I so I just decided, just do it."

Goals

Seventy percent of the women stated they enrolled at Lake Michigan College with a clearly defined career goal. Five identified this goal as a nursing certificate or degree. All five stated that this was a career they had chosen in high school. Since enrolling in college, four of the five have maintained this goal while one now identifies her goal as transferring to a four-year institution. At the time of their enrollment, two women identified specific certificate or degree programs other than nursing as a goal, two identified a degree program as their goal but were undecided on a major, and one was totally undecided. Since that time all who were undecided have identified a major and a certificate or degree goal. Currently, eight women are seeking an associate’s degree, one a certificate, and one intends to transfer. Eighty percent of the women now indicate that once they have attained their current goal,
they are considering continuing toward a higher degree. Table 2 delineates the current educational goal and highest degree planned by these women.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Current goal</th>
<th>Highest degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate (LPN)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No degree - transfer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. LPN = Licensed Practical Nurse

In addition to degree goals, 30% of the women articulated self-actualizing goals. As Erika stated, “Well, my first goal was to see if I still had what it took. If I could still be a student and get good grades.” Others first identified smaller goals leading to their degree goal. Selene stated when she enrolled at Lake Michigan College her goal was to, “Go part-time and take at least two classes a semester toward my degree.” Faith stated she wanted, “...to take classes that could get me into college level classes, which would get me my basic education and then to my nursing classes and my nursing degree.”

For these women who enrolled between the ages of 25-47, a college education symbolized greater opportunity, a better career, and a better life for their families. Major life transitions or work related goals influenced by the support of friends or
children led most to enroll. Others additionally describe a defining moment when they decided to just do it.

Barriers to Persistence

Fear of Failure

Fear of entering college was articulated by 90% of the women. They discussed a fear of not fitting in with younger students, failing to succeed academically, or failing to handle the combination of work and school. Several other individual fears were noted including taking tests, what the teachers would be like, and not getting all A’s. Jamie stated she was not really afraid of anything. The nine other participants expressed substantial fears.

Sandi described her fears as follows,

_I feared I would fail and that I would not be able to do it. And then of course all the past stuff comes back into my mind. Am I really good enough? Am I really smart enough? Can I really handle the load?_

Gwen stated, _“I work...I think my greatest fear was, was it going to be more than I can handle.”_ Faith reflected, _“I really had this fear that there would be young kids looking at me like, my god, what is she doing here.”_ Selene observed,

_You know, all those young people sayin’, ‘Why is this lady coming back to school?’ and when I got in, it was just the opposite, there was more of us than them, and after that it was like forget it, I’m here just like you are._

One other fear was expressed by Robin who re-enrolled after leaving college 25 years earlier, _“My only fear was I am doing this all over again. You haven’t done
this in 25 years. So, I was afraid of myself.”

Fears that students bring with them to college have the potential to become barriers to persistence. Fifty percent of the women indicated that while they had fears at the time they enrolled, these fears were not viewed as barriers to attending. As the women persisted in college the fears they voiced decreased, and what they articulated as barriers increased. Overall, the primary barriers expressed by the women were: (1) finding time for homework, (2) not knowing how to study, (3) lack of self-confidence, (4) juggling work, family and college, (5) course difficulty, (6) fitting in, and (7) isolated negative professional staff or faculty interactions. Outside of the college the primary barriers cited were: (a) money, (b) spousal conflicts, (c) care of older parents, (d) lack of family support, and (e) health issues.

**Enrollment Barriers**

Thirty percent of the women cited fear originating from a lack of self-confidence as their biggest barrier at enrollment. Additionally, 20% of the women stated during the enrollment process they experienced stress. They believed this stress was the result of inaccurate advice or a lack of information. Faith stated, “*When I went to enroll, I would have liked to talk with someone who was knowledgeable because I got bad information twice and I have two withdrawals because of that.*” Celeste stated, “*No one told me that I needed to get my high school transcript. I thought the college did it. So when I came to get my books, I found out I was going to be dropped from my classes if I didn’t get it. It was unnecessary stress.*”
**First Semester Barriers**

In recalling their first semester, 50% of the women stated that finding time for homework became a serious barrier. "Probably the hardest was fitting in study time," stated Barb, "I can remember laying in bed at night and trying to study and literally falling asleep with books in my lap because it was the only time I could fit it in."

Finding time to study is a concern that would be repeated by these women throughout their college experience.

How to study was also a major concern expressed by every student. Thirty percent mentioned poor note-taking and comprehension skills. One discussed the need to learn to think critically. Faith described the barrier as, "Getting back into studying and remembering how to study and how to keep things organized. I was so lost that first semester." Selene said, "It had been a long time since I took notes and I wanted to really comprehend it." Erika confirmed this stating, "The note-taking, if I knew what I had to study there wouldn't have been any problem. But there was so much information. I didn't know if I was focusing on what I needed to and it was frustrating."

**First Year Barriers**

At the end of the first year, 30% of the women identified their greatest barrier as time management related to working, taking classes, and finding study time. Thirty percent also observed that figuring out how to study continued to be a significant barrier. Other women stated spousal adjustments, transportation concerns, and course difficulty, such as writing a term paper were significant barriers. Explaining these
problems, Barb commented, "Just getting myself use to making the time and trying to figure out how to study. I didn’t know how to study." Selene stated, "Writing a term paper, because I had not done it in many years."

Overall Barriers

Overall, 60% of the women stated that currently they did not feel there were any significant barriers within the college impacting their persistence. However, 30% stated they continued to struggle with inadequate study skills. Celeste stated she still struggled with being older than the other students in her classes.

While the women saw the faculty as supportive overall, 30% identified a specific incident involving a negative faculty experience that caused them to consider leaving the college. In each situation the women stated they felt they were treated rudely or they felt minimized and excluded. Faith explained, "One teacher in particular singled out people in the class and if you were not part of that little group, well too bad." Barb stated,

I had a meeting and the instructor just blew my mind. Not a nice person, when I tried to explain that I could not just quit my job to do this, pretty much she was done talking to me. At the point, I just walked out of here and said I’m done. I am not coming back.

It appears that the actions or statements of the faculty unknowingly reinforced the internal fears of the women that they would not fit in, could not succeed in college, or would not be able to juggle the multiple activities and obligations in their lives. The women’s initial reaction to this was flight from college.
External Barriers to Persistence

External barriers may also impact persistence. At enrollment only 10% of the participants saw money as a barrier to persistence. In later semesters 50% indicated money became an issue. Generally this concern centered on a reduction in work hours or loss of a job. As Jamie stated, “So far I have financial aid, but that is changing this spring and summer and my work hours are being cut, so maybe I won’t go.” Women working fulltime were also affected. As Gwen said, “The college doesn’t participate in loan programs. They say I make too much to receive financial aid, but I am a single parent and I just don’t see it.”

Support of Spouse

For some married women lack of spousal support was seen as a barrier. Approximately 60% of the married women or women who had been married voiced this concern. Sandi stated, “My husband does not like change, so there is a little conflict now, but we are working hard on it.” Jamie stated, “My ex-husband was a barrier because he said he was supportive, but his actions were not supportive. He complained that I was spending too much time studying or that I wasn’t there when I was in school.” Robin stated that she and her husband were currently separated because he did not want her to go to school.

Health Concerns

Medical or health concerns of the women themselves, a child, or a spouse caused 20% to miss classes, withdraw from a class, or stop-out for a semester. Taking care of older parents was a concern for 20% of the women. As Erika stated, “My
parents think because they are retired that I should be home visiting with them all
day. They really aren't encouraging me." Denice who has four children described the
additional time demands of assisting her mother, "I carry my mom around and pay
all her bills."

Lack of Self-confidence

Finally, self-confidence continued to be an issue in later semesters for 30% of
the women. As Erika stated, "Sometimes I feel that I don't have what it takes,
sometimes I just feel lost."

Non-persistence

Fifty percent of the women indicated that they had considered leaving college.
Barb stated her thoughts about leaving as, "There have been a few times
throughout...I was overloaded outside of school. Family problems, car problems,
money problems." Gwen who did leave for a year stated, "I quit at the semester. I
thought I needed a break. Kinda stressful with working. When you go part-time it
takes so long, I took two classes and it wipes you out."

Work and Family Adjustments

Work Adjustments

Women and their families made adjustments in order to attend college. These
adjustments centered on work and family life. At college entry all 10 women worked;
five full-time and five part-time. At the current time, eight of the women are
employed, two full-time, one three quarter time and five part-time. One of the results
of these work hour reductions is the reported increase in stress regarding financial
concerns. Of the women who no longer work or had a reduction in hours, 40% of the reductions were due to an employer reduction in hours or job lay-off. Sixty percent of the women chose to reduce work hours or stop working. Other adjustments in work hours included getting off an hour early to attend class, changing work shifts, and working Saturdays.

**Family Adjustments**

Adjustments in family life were reported by 90% of the women. These adjustments were experienced in two primary areas: a change in household responsibilities and time management. Forty percent of the women indicated a spouse or child(ren) now share the responsibility of household chores such as cooking, cleaning, or transporting children. Erika stated, “My kids had to start to learn to do the dishes and keep the house clean. My husband has had to let up a little on my help in his business.” Faith stated, “Dad has to feed the kids and dad has to run them.” Robin stated, “My house is dirty. My kids don’t eat quite as healthy as they used to.”

Of the married women, 50% stated spousal adjustment was difficult. Sandi stated,

*The fact that I am not at home all the time was a big adjustment to me and my husband, as well. I started working because I needed the money to go to school and that was part of the negotiating or compromising as far as me being in school, that I would have a job.*
Robin stated, "My husband did not want me to go to school. So we separated and that was very hard to be there for the kids and in school, and work."

Losing time with their children was a significant stressful concern for 30% of the women. Jamie stated, "There were occasions when I would miss something at the school for the kids because there was a test that night that I really just couldn't miss." Gwen stated, "If I got out of work early for class I had to work Saturday, so I lost time with my daughter. And I think that was important, because I only have one child and once she grows up that is it, so I missed a lot of time with her."

**Scheduling Study Time**

The most perplexing and difficult adjustment stated by 50% of the women was finding time to do homework. Erika stated her biggest adjustment was, "Study time, I try to come up here [to college] early because when I get home I can't study. My husband has a business, employees call, I am the gopher." Barb indicated, "I work fulltime. I have my daughter. She has activities. I go to classes. So when I am finally home, I try to do homework."

**Contrasts**

In contrast, Denice stated she had reduced her work hours to attend college but had made no other adjustments in her family life. Celeste reflected that very little change had been required stating, "Not really too much adjustment. It really has worked out. There are a few times where there is a struggle with my kids over who gets the computer. But, that's about it."
Summary of Barriers

The most significant barrier reported by the women upon entering college was their lack of self-confidence. During the first semester, this continued to be a concern but finding time to do homework, lack of study skills, and time management became the most significant barriers. At the end of their first year in college managing work, college, and family, and a need for improved study skills were still the most common barriers expressed. External to the college, financial concerns, spousal conflict, health issues, and care of older parents were identified as barriers that made persisting more difficult.

As the women move forward in their college career, the focus on juggling the multiple responsibilities of their lives continues. A lack of self-confidence, finding time to study, and improving study skills continue to be reported as stressful barriers. Barb, who is on the verge of graduation stated, “Trying to keep my grades up and still be a good mom has been difficult. I really have to use my time management well.”

Support Toward Persistence

Primary Supports of Persistence

Supports articulated by the women came from inside and outside of the college, although the greatest support they received was reported as from within themselves.

The primary supports expressed were: (1) inner desire, (2) counselors and professional staff, (3) student support programs, (4) peers, (5) instructors, (6) tutors,
and (7) financial assistance. Outside of the college primary supports were: (a) family, (b) children, (c) friends, and (d) personal faith and/or support of church.

Enrollment Support

During the time they enrolled, 80% of the women indicated that they felt supported by a counselor or staff member. This support was primarily verbal and related to four areas the women believed were important to them. Forty percent of the women heard an affirmation of their ability; 30% were emotionally encouraged; 20% were reassured that they would fit in; 10% felt support for the decision they had made to attend college; and 10% received unanticipated financial support. Three words were stated by 50% of the women describing their enrollment experience: nice, comfortable, and relaxed. Half of the women who stated they felt supported during their enrollment discussed supportive comments made by a staff member or that individuals were nice or pleasant to them. Erika explained this as, “The girls in the office were very encouraging and said, ‘Oh, you can do this. You will be fine’.” Faith stated, “The guy that did the testing, he made me feel like I wasn’t an old person. He made me feel comfortable. The lady when I registered said to me, ‘I like the way you think.’” Support shown to others came from counselors who talked with them in terms they could understand or helped them feel relaxed and comfortable about being in college.

In contrast, Barb stated, “I really don’t remember much, kind of a blur, just sent here and there, get this, get that. I just did it.”
**First Semester Support**

During the first semester of college, the women's sources of support appeared to shift. Fifty percent stated their instructors were the greatest source of support. In addition, 30% related counselors or staff support as important to their persistence, 30% stated peer support; 20% stated tutoring; and 10% stated financial support. For 90% of the women affirmation of their ability and general encouragement were the most important ways they felt supported. Regarding faculty interaction, Selene stated, "The teachers took their time and patience and that is a lot within itself. They made it clear, we want you to succeed." Sandi stated, "The teachers gave me constant reinforcement and encouragement. They respected me."

The women saw support external to the college during the first semester as arising primarily from friends and family. Thirty percent stated friends provided support, 30% named their children, 20% stated a family member and 10% identified a spouse. Jamie stated she had no external support her first semester in college.

Reflecting on the first semester, 50% of the women identified their academic success as the primary factor influencing their return. In addition, 30% indicated their own inner desire to succeed was also influential, 30% cited their children, 20% voiced their faith in God's purpose for their life, and 20% noted the need for job improvement. Their mindset at this time was voiced by Selene who stated, "I got good grades. I was shocked. I thanked God for it." Barb said, "I was getting decent grades and I was proud of myself and I pretty much proved to myself at that point that I could do it." Regarding her children Denice stated, "My kids actually looked up to
me.” Regarding faith, Sandi stated, “Inner desire, inner drive...I feel that God is a lot of that, he’s really encouraged me and pushed me forward.”

First Year Support

Eighty percent of the women stated at the end of their first year of college they felt happy, proud, relieved, or excited. They credited their persistence to their inner desire to succeed and their academic success. For those who were not as academically successful, attainment of their goal was still a primary motivation to continue. Celeste, who was 45 at the time, summed it up as follows, “Relieved, proud, that I had accomplished it. I had a really difficult class and I cheered and skipped out the door, when I had accomplished it.” Denice stated, “Happy. I had passed all my classes but my grades were kinda low and that got me down because I knew I could do better. So what I did was I retook my classes until I got it right.”

Overall Support

Reflecting on their overall college experience, 50% of the women reaffirmed that their inner desire was the most important factor to their persistence. Additionally, 60% of the women credited a student support program or support program staff as significant to their overall persistence. Thirty percent found counselors; 10% named instructors; 10% cited tutoring; 10% stated financial assistance, and 10% found peers supportive. Concerning contacts with support program staff, Celeste stated, “She was all kudos, you’re doing well, she was proud of me, she was very supportive.” Sandi stated,

Verbally encouraging me, encouraging me, encouraging me. The student
support program really helped lay out the plan. This is what I needed to do to reach my goal. We are going to help you reach your goal. That was what I needed because I had no clue when I walked through the door.

Regarding the impact of tutoring support, Faith stated, “My math tutor was already in the nursing program and doing what I wanted to do. That really helped, she kept telling me about the classes and that I could do it.”

Outside the college, 50% of the women stated family support was the most important factor in their persistence. Thirty percent specified the support of their children as opposed to extended family support, and 20% the support of friends. In addition, 30% indicated spiritual support such as faith in God or their church praying for them. Jamie described her overall persistence as,

My desire to do better. My desire to have something to fall back on and something to move ahead with. Education is never, ever wasted in my opinion. So I was the major influence. No one pushed me, but once I decided they have been supportive.

Negative Support

For 20% of the women one other aspect of support was expressed, the motivation of negative family support. Celeste stated,

During one semester many times I considered dropping, but one of my older sisters said to another sister that I would just quit and never accomplish it. And it was enough to drive me through. So some negative aspects helped me drive through.
Barb stated, "All the people telling me I can't. Kinda to prove them wrong. My mom did the whole time I was growing up and still does now."

Summary of Support

All of the women indicated they had been supported during their overall college experience in one or more ways by a program or individual, although the sources of this support changed. During the enrollment process counselors and staff were seen as the primary sources of support. The most important words and actions conveyed to these women were stated as affirmations of their ability, emotional encouragement, and the assurance that they would fit in. It was also significant that these women consistently described the atmosphere created during their initial enrollment as relaxed and comfortable at a time when they reported being fearful.

During the first semester, the women saw their instructors as very significant in assisting with coursework, affirming ability, and providing encouragement. For 50% the classroom interaction with their instructor was their key support. This corresponds in part to the 50% who stated that their academic success the first semester and the resultant increase in self-efficacy had the greatest impact on their persistence.

At the end of the first year, another significant shift occurred when the women stated that their inner pride and desire to succeed were the most important supports in their persistence. During this year, peers began to be seen as influencing persistence along with student support programs. Encouragement and affirmation continued to be key to the persistence of the women throughout their college experience.
When the women reflected on the overall changes between their first semester and the current time, the primary motivation and support for change was seen as coming from within themselves. This corresponds with the women's previous report of their inner desire as the primary motivator to persistence. For 30% of the women spirituality was a significant source of motivation. Table 3 provides summary comparison data on the statements of these women comparing and contrasting their first semester to the current time. It indicates why they feel the changes occurred, and who or what they believe to be the primary influence in these changes.

Institutional Response

Overall College Experience

In describing their overall college experience 80% of the women used positive terms. Comments from Sandi, Jamie, Faith, Selene, and Gwen included, “Exciting, fun, new,” “Busy, but good,” “I’ve loved it, “A good challenge,” and “It has been rewarding.” Robin and Erika stated, “Trying,” and “I just don’t know.”

The women describe themselves as more studious, more dedicated, and more serious. Jamie stated, “The students who are more my age I see lots of similarities. I think when you are older you are more focused and driven. You have more of a solid goal.” Gwen reflected, “I think I am smarter than when I first started. I am using more of my brain now. When I started out I had a lot of on the job training but not actual book training.” Celeste said, “Non-traditional, we all seem to have the same background, you know divorced or single, all trying to reach the security of a good paying job or career.”
Table 3

Non-traditional Female Students Reported Changes Between First Semester and Current Semester and the Primary Influence Reported for the Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>First semester</th>
<th>Current time</th>
<th>Prime influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandi</td>
<td>Frightened, not knowing what to expect, not knowing whether I could do it or not.</td>
<td>Much more certain, stronger purpose from within, grown from conflicts.</td>
<td>Friends Faculty God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Never thought I would graduate</td>
<td>Know I will graduate, I stuck it out</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>Like the first day of school, scared and excited.</td>
<td>More familiar, more confident, better at looking ahead, more savvy on scheduling, better timing on parking</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denice</td>
<td>Scared, happy, scared</td>
<td>It is a routine, I am used to it, working toward a goal</td>
<td>Self God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>The new guy, didn’t know my way around, how to study was challenging</td>
<td>Know my way around, feel comfortable, in student mode, you develop a routine</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Scared to death, afraid to ask questions, didn’t know my way around, didn’t know where to park</td>
<td>Not afraid to ask questions, know my way around, made friends, I am not scared anymore, greater self-confidence</td>
<td>Getting an A Self Staff Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Little afraid because of age</td>
<td>Comfortable, smarter, using more of my brain,</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Walking blind, less confident, concerned about making it all work</td>
<td>More confident, in a routine, know the system</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selene</td>
<td>Fearful, excited, don’t know what to expect, can I do it?</td>
<td>Self-confident, know I can handle it, wasn’t too far behind, I can do it</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>Nervous, did not know what to expect</td>
<td>Happier, sense of accomplishment</td>
<td>Self Church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions for New Non-traditional Female Students

All of the women had suggestions for new adult women students entering Lake Michigan College. Sixty percent stated they would first tell them not to be afraid and assure them they could do it. Forty percent stated that they would then encourage the student to see a counselor and join a student support group. Individual students stated they would introduce a new person to the tutoring center, give them advice on setting aside study time and good places to study, provide information about instructors, and encourage them to speak with faculty. As to study time Celeste suggested, "Be creative on study time. Find time when you are mentally ready to do it and physically able to sit down and not be interrupted. Try to accomplish homework on time."

Regarding general support, Selene suggested, "Talk to an advisor. Talk to friends, an instructor, someone who will give you support to say you can do it, and if it is your goal, stick to it, be committed and dedicated." Celeste encouraged, "Don't be afraid, even the young students have the same worries or nervousness. Don't be afraid to approach a professor about problems, because they are more than willing to help, if you are struggling." Erika stated, "If you are afraid, just do it. You're never going to know unless you try and if you don't try then you have already failed."

Programming and Service Suggestions

The women had several ideas regarding the improvement of services for non-traditional female students including offering credit for life experience or certificates earned through job related workshops or seminars; initiating a student to student
textbook exchange program to save money; offering more weekend classes; initiating a class for adult women returning to school to assist them with study skills; and holding a meeting for new non-traditional students where current non-traditional students can share their experiences. Other areas they stated as critical to adult women students were having knowledgeable academic advising and making a connection with a support person or student support program.

Discussion

Levinson and Levinson (1996) describe the Dream which gives meaning to a woman's life and motivates her. They state that a woman may temporarily renounce this dream in order to pursue more pragmatic goals. For some non-traditional women in this study the dream of college or a career that requires a college education was delayed by marriage or children. For others, following high school with a college education was never a dream. With or without this dream it was life's realities and life transitions that led most to attend college.

Life transitions for the women occurred when children went to college, when they experienced divorce, or when one woman learned to drive and her youngest child attended school. Others saw the reality of job limitations, the necessity of improving job marketability, or the need for career advancement. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bowers (2000) found that significant life events such as a loss of job, divorce, or career limitation were motivating factors in the decision of adult women to attend college. This study expands this definition to include the empty nest of older children attending college and young children attending school all day. It also includes
learning to drive, which can be seen as a life-changing event regardless of age.

The women in this study were all persisters. They began college with the goal of obtaining a certificate or associate's degree, or to transfer to a four-year college. As they persisted the majority began to rethink their degree attainment goal. Most currently voice the desire to achieve a degree higher than their original goal. This is similar to the findings of Goldsmith and Archambault (1997) who stated that when persisters redefine their goals, it is usually to raise them. They further found that women who persist hold education itself as a goal. For the women in this study, this was best described by Jamie who said, "Education is never, ever wasted."

Goals and motivation are significant to persistence. Self-confidence is also key. Despite years of real life experience as single women, wives, mothers, community participants, and employees, a lack of self-confidence contributed to many of these women entering college as received knowers (Belenky, 1986). This lack of self-confidence was expressed as stemming from school experiences 15-20 years earlier, the time gap for college entry, fear of not being able to balance the multiple responsibilities in their lives, and for some a lack of support. Holding jobs and attending college put these women in two different worlds on a daily basis. Kasworm (2003) discussed the academic and real world knowledge view of adult learners. Gwen reflected the entry voice student discussed by Kasworm when she stated, "I think I am smarter than when I started. I had a lot of on the job training but not actual book training." Creating an institutional climate both in and out of the classroom that recognizes and values the life experience of non-traditional female
students assists in their social and academic integration and in the advancement of these women as adult learners. Tinto (1997) found social and academic life on a community college campus to be interwoven, with social communities emerging out of academic classroom activities and collaborative academic classroom activities also social in character. As Tinto’s (1993) model discusses, greater academic and social integration coupled with institutional experiences influences student goal development which positively influences student persistence.

Johnson (1997) stated that students who had closer contact with faculty were the retained ones. While the women in this study clearly identified academic integration and the attendant interaction with instructors during the first semester, the importance of faculty interaction in later semesters was not as clearly heard. Maxwell (2000) discussed relationships as being anchored in the classroom. No pattern of discussion regarding faculty involvement was evident after the first semester. This is an area for further study.

In keeping with the results of Hagedorn (2000) who found that one-half of all community college students never participate in activities with other students, 40% of the women in this study stated they were not involved on campus. Since all of these women participate in a student support program, it appears some do not view this program as a campus activity or do not believe the impact of their involvement to be personally significant. However, 60% stated they were involved and for these women participation was generally defined as interaction with friends, a student support program, or tutoring. Generally, students participate in a student support program or
tutoring because they believe they have a need for academic assistance. What they voice that they are also receiving is emotional support and affirmation of ability. This interaction may then support Tinto's assertion that social integration in a community college arises out of academic activities.

Much of the literature on the persistence of adult women students describes the main barrier to persistence as the juggling of work, family, and college. While this was confirmed, this study also focused on the search for time to do homework as the primary obstacle to better balance in these women's lives. It appears that while work, family, and college classroom time were known factors, the amount of study time needed was not. Even in later semesters when the women were in what was described by Erika as "student mode" finding time to study continued to be a significant barrier. The balance of these areas appears tenuous and the introduction of unanticipated stressors such as family health concerns or a loss of energy tipped the scales toward stopping-out.

Tinto (1993, 1997) suggested that even when an individual views the college experience as positive, external commitments may impact retention. Consistent with this and several other studies (Hoffman & Elias, 1999; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bowers, 2000; Napoli & Wortman, 1998) some of the women experiencing multiple demands on their time from work, family and college left for a semester or a year. Gwen typified this, stating, "I quit at the semester. I thought I needed a break. Kinda stressful with working." This study supports a finding that it is important for an institution to differentiate between the student who must stop-out and the non-
persister. Faculty and staff recognition of individual circumstances for stopping-out and support of the student during this process may assist retention by preventing a stop-out from becoming a non-persister.

Four other themes were clearly articulated by the women in this study. First was the importance of inner desire in successful persistence. Second was a continuing lack of self-confidence in spite of this inner desire. Third was the barrier of poor study skills. Fourth was the role of spirituality in the college experience. While the literature reviewed discussed the first three aspects, the fourth theme of spirituality was not reflected. For 30% of the women in this study belief in God and the prayers of church members were seen as a significant support throughout the college experience. The importance of spirituality was articulated across different ethnic groups.

In addition to spirituality, family and specifically children were seen as the most significant external supports. For the majority in the study, spouses were not. While the former statement confirms the findings of Greenberg (1999) the latter does not, as he found that married students reported the support of their spouse to be significant. A lack of spousal support did not deter the women in this study from their goal. However, the stress created by a lack of spousal support was not beneficial to persistence and acted at times to tip the scales toward non-persistence. Institutionally, it could be beneficial to provide an orientation for spouses and children of non-traditional students, just as colleges do for the parents of traditional students.
Fear and affirmation proved equally significant in this study. For the adult women in this study this fear was most readily articulated in four areas: failure to succeed in an educational environment, concern about competing with younger students, apprehension about how or if they would fit in with the college population, and worry about juggling family, work and educational responsibilities. Initially staff and counselors provided a supportive environment and affirmation of ability that went a long way towards easing the entry into college. Faculty were key to affirming abilities, particularly in the first semester. The value of knowledgeable academic advising (AAUW, 1999) and first semester academic achievement (Greenberg, 1999) as supporters of persistence were confirmed by this study. Women reveled in their first semester academic achievement, which they expressed as key to their second semester persistence. Student support programs and peers impacted the second and later semesters by providing emotional encouragement, continuing affirmation of ability, providing a plan for goal achievement, and assisting the women in feeling connected to the institution.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Convenience, cost, and location will continue to attract large numbers of non-traditional female students to enter post-secondary education through community colleges. The partnership between the institution and each student begins once she walks through the doors. Recognizing the initial fears and potential pitfalls to the persistence of non-traditional female students assigns a responsibility to the institution to design courses and programming to promote persistence. The college
must strive to deliver this programming in a manner that allows the greatest number of adult women to participate. It must continue to construct a climate that values the life experience of adult women students and is conducive to their success. This climate is created both in and out of the classroom and is enhanced by verbal encouragement at enrollment and by patience, support, and affirmation of ability by faculty. The inner desire to succeed, which is pivotal to persistence, cannot be instilled by the institution. However, given the multiple demands of work, family, college and study time on non-traditional female students, a climate for attrition may be fostered by institutional disinterest or neglect. The following recommendations are made to assist in the retention of non-traditional female students.

1. Recognize and encourage staff who have the initial enrollment contact with non-traditional women students. These individuals are providing key verbal support and affirmation to these women that they remember years later as having a positive impact on their enrollment and persistence.

2. Recognize and encourage faculty who provide these women patient, supportive, and ability affirming first semester experiences that directly impact second semester retention.

3. Develop a college wide retention program. Identify a task force that will determine definitions of terms to be used for college retention data, apply them uniformly, determine retention goals, and programming initiatives.

4. Determine if successful projects can be expanded to other departments or new projects initiated, such as supplemental instruction, in-class tutors, peer
assisted learning, or learning communities.

5. Pilot cohort programs using a team approach with faculty, advisors, tutors, and support staff. Consider utilization with a cohort of transfer students who have a fairly well defined general education transfer curriculum or with a career specific certificate or degree program.

6. Offer structured group study sessions in targeted courses to model the study group concept to students and provide a forum for peer interaction centered on class content.

7. Offer more weekend classes. Offer study skills and freshman seminar classes in the evening and on weekends.

8. Link a freshman seminar class the first half of Fall semester with a one-credit study skills class the second half of Fall semester. Follow this in the second semester with a one credit advanced study skills class linked with a one credit course, such as basic computer skills, career exploration, or stress management. This will add a semester of study skills in the first year with targeted reinforcement of the skills in the linked course.

9. Develop a Saturday orientation for non-traditional women students. Offer free daycare. Include a student panel discussion by returning adult women.

10. Develop a workshop and materials on what the college experience will be like for spouses and children. For younger children, develop a coloring book. Identify students to assist with this project.
11. Woman to Woman - Develop a brochure targeted at non-traditional students discussing common pitfalls to persistence, listing resources, and offering tips.

12. Develop a weekend or evening Stress Management workshop.

13. Encourage non-traditional students to schedule study time in the same manner they schedule class time and to utilize the library to study. Provide an alternative to the library for studying, such as a room with comfortable furniture and computer access that is designated as a quiet study area.

14. Reinforce a college climate which is sensitive to the needs of non-traditional female students through faculty and staff professional development. Provide current information on issues of student retention and gather feedback for continuous improvement.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study looked at the experiences of non-traditional female student persisters at Lake Michigan College. Further study of the barriers and supports to persistence viewed by non-traditional female students who are non-persisters is recommended.

The persisters in this study were already participants in a student support group. Additional inquiry concerning non-traditional female persisters at Lake Michigan College who are not part of a student support group may provide a broader view of this population.

The degree of faculty influence reported by these study participants was minimal after the first semester. Further study on the influence of faculty, academic
integration in and out of the classroom, and academic support such as tutoring or supplemental instruction should be conducted.

This study was ethnically diverse. Some literature indicates that minority non-traditional female students have unique persistence concerns. A focused study of minority adult women could assist in identifying any concerns.

This study involved female students. Many non-traditional students are male. A study of non-traditional male student persisters and non-persisters would provide an enhanced view of student persistence.

**Plan for Dissemination**

The results of this study will be utilized in a review of the programming for the Student Support Services program at Lake Michigan College. This study will be made available to the Vice-President of Academic and Student Services at Lake Michigan College for institutional consideration. Finally, it will be provided to the Grand Valley State University Library where it will be available to other researchers and the public.
References


and student-faculty relations is community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 24*(7), 587-598.


Napoli, A. R., & Wortman, P. M. (1998). Psychosocial factors related to retention and


Appendix A

Human Research Review Committee Application
Principal Investigator(s): Nancy Johnson ____________________ Telephone 269-428-3306 (h) 269-927-8100 (w)
Address Principal Investigator(s): 5660 Golden Crest Stevensville, MI 49127

Department of School: Advanced Studies in Education
Title of Project: Self-reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College.

Summary of the Project:
Using a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus groups I will examine the factors that delay women's pursuit of post-secondary education, those that influence later entry, and the barriers and supports that impact retention.

In what capacity does this project involve human subjects? (E.g., surveys, interviews, clinical trial, use of medical records, etc.) Students will complete a demographic questionnaire, be individually interviewed, and participate in a focus group.

Check One: (A.S.E. projects are typically eligible for the exempt review)
X This is a report on research on human subjects which is exempted by 46.101 of the Federal Register 4616:8336, January 26, 1981. (Refer to instructions on the reverse of this form).

This is a request for expedited review as described in 46.110 of the Federal Register 46(16):8336, January 26, 1981. (Refer to instructions on the reverse of this form.)

This is a request for full review. (Refer to instructions on the reverse of this form.)

Dr. B: Lorraine Alston
Name of Project Supervisor

Signature of Project Supervisor ________________________ 2/28/03

Project Supervisor Phone Number ____________________________ alstonl@gvsu.edu

E-mail

*NOTE: Proposals which do not include a summary of the project and which fail to respond to the requirements stated in the instructions for applicants (on back of this form or on a separate page entitled "Instructions for Applicants") will not be considered and will be sent back to the authors.

Rev. 10/18/1999
Human Subjects Review

Name: Nancy L. Johnson
Address: 5660 Golden Crest, Stevensville, Michigan 49127
Phone: 269-428-3306 E-Mail johnsonn@lakemichigancollege.edu
Title of Thesis: Self-reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College

1. Describe significance of project:
Increasing numbers of non-traditional students are enrolling in post-secondary education. Community college is the primary open access institution offering this opportunity for non-traditional women. Results from this study may benefit the improvement of the delivery of services to this target population.

2. Describe methods and procedure:
Using a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus groups I will examine the factors that delay women's pursuit of post-secondary education, those that influence later entry, and the barriers and supports that impact retention. All interviews and focus groups will be audio taped to facilitate accurate record keeping and will be erased following transcription. A triangulation of methods will be used to examine the experiences.

3. Describe participants or target population:
Non-traditional female students have been selected as the target population as they constitute a growing segment of the community college population. Ten (10) non-traditional female students will be asked to participate in this study. Non-traditional females will be defined as women who had no college experience prior to enrolling at Lake Michigan College to pursue an Associate degree or certificate and who were 23 years of age or older at first enrollment. Initially, students will be selected from individuals participating in the Student Support Service program. Should this yield fewer then ten participants, students will then be selected from the general college population.

4. Risk and Benefits:
All participation is voluntary and participants may discontinue participation at any time. There is no cost associated with participation. There will be no remuneration for participation. There is little risk associated with this study. Student participant names will be kept confidential. Students who choose to participate in a focus group may benefit from sharing experiences with other non-traditional women. Individually each student may benefit from examining her path to successful retention.

5. Copy of Informed consent:
Attached.
6. **State how informed consent will be obtained:**
   Informed consent will be obtained by speaking individually with each potential participant, providing them with a letter that details the scope of this study, and obtaining a signed consent form. Records will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office (C207) of this applicant or on applicant’s computer located at Lake Michigan College, 2755 E. Napier Avenue, Benton Harbor, Michigan; or at the home of this applicant located at 5660 Golden Crest, Stevensville, Michigan. After transcription, audiotapes will be erased. Records will be retained until this project is completed and submitted to Grand Valley State University.

7. **Copy of questionnaire, survey, or testing instrument:**
   Attached.

8. **Copy of institutional or organizational approvals:**
   Attached.

9. **Justify exempt status:**
   This study meets the criteria of exempt categories #2 (Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.) and #5 (Research that is conducted by or subject to the approval of supporting agencies, and which is designed to study evaluate, or otherwise examine: C – possible changes in or alternatives to programs or procedures.) This study will be conducted at Lake Michigan College with the approval of this institution. It involves female, adult non-vulnerable participants. Participation is voluntary. All participants will sign a consent form. All audiotaping of interviews and focus groups is to facilitate accurate record keeping and tapes will be erased following transcription. Information from existing records or documents will be used in summary form maintaining the confidentiality of all participants. The results of this study may benefit the improvement of services to the target population at Lake Michigan College.

10. **Copy of funding proposal:**
    Not applicable.
March 14, 2003

Nancy Johnson
5660 Golden Crest
Stevensville, MI  49127

RE: Proposal #03-152-H

Dear Nancy:

Your proposed project entitled Self-Reported Factors Influencing the Retention of Non-Traditional Female Students at Lake Michigan College has been viewed. It is exempt from the regulations by section 46.101 of the Federal Register 46(16):8336, January 26, 1981.

Sincerely,

Paul Huizenga, Chair
Human Research Review Committee
Appendix B

Lake Michigan College Approval
We give approval for Nancy L. Johnson to conduct a study at Lake Michigan College entitled, "Self-reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College," as part of her Master of Education degree from Grand Valley State University. The approval of Lake Michigan College is subject to the approval of the Grand Valley State University - Human Research Review Committee.

Dr. W. Chuck Philip  
Vice-President of Academic and Student Services  
Lake Michigan College

Janice Varney  
Dean of Student Services  
Lake Michigan College

Date  
Jan 20, 2003

Date  
Feb 11, 2003
Subject to the approval of Grand Valley State University of proposal number 03-152-H, a thesis study entitled *Self-Reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College*, approval is given for Nancy Johnson to conduct this study and upon receipt of the prior written consent of each student study participant, Nancy Johnson will be permitted to access the student's record.

W. Chuck Philip  
Vice-President, Academic and Student Services  

Janie Varney  
Dean of Student Services  

27 Feb 03  
Date  

Feb 27, 2003  
Date
Appendix C

Participant Letter of Explanation and Consent
Dear Name,

I am currently enrolled at Grand Valley State University in the College Student Affairs Leadership program. I am writing a thesis for the completion of my Master of Education degree. My thesis will explore the experiences of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College. Using a questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups I will examine the factors that delay non-traditional women’s pursuit of post-secondary education, those that influence entry, and the barriers and supports that impact retention.

I am requesting your participation in this study. As a participant you will be asked to complete a questionnaire, you will be individually interviewed and this interview will be audiotaped, and you may be asked to participate in a focus group with up to ten (10) other non-traditional female students. This focus group will also be audiotaped.

I request permission to access your Lake Michigan College student records. I will not be using any individual student data that could be traced to you. I plan to use student records data in summary form only.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at 927-8100 ext. 5086 or 428-3306 or my EDG695 advisor, Dr. Lorraine Alston, at 616-771-6591. If you have any questions about the human subjects rights in the study, you may contact Paul Huizenga (616-331-2472), Chair of Grand Valley’s Human Subject Research Review Board, 234 Padnos, Allendale, MI 49401.

Your signature at the bottom of this letter confirms your participation in this study and gives permission for Nancy Johnson to access your records at Lake Michigan College, interview you and/or conducted focus groups in which you are a participant, and utilize all information collected through this study as part of a thesis.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There is no cost to participate in this study. No payment will be made to you for your participation. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

Thank you for assisting in this study.

Sincerely,

Nancy L. Johnson

I, ________________________________, state that I am at least 18 years of age and give permission to Nancy L. Johnson to access my student records at Lake Michigan College. I further give permission to be audio taped during my interview and focus group participation. I give permission for all information collected in this study to be used as part of a thesis. I understand this thesis will be catalogued in the GVSU library and will be available to other students and colleges for circulation.

Permission granted by: ____________________________ Date: ______________

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Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

Self-reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College.

Name ___________________________ Date of Birth __________________

Telephone number ________________ Best time to reach you ___ Day ___ Evening

Marital Status ___ single ___ married ___ divorced ___ widowed

Please state the occupants of your home, their age, and relationship to you (ex. son, age 12)

_____________________________________________________________

Do you use daycare services for your child(ren)? ___ yes ___ no Hours per week? ___

If yes, do you use ___ LMC Kidzone ___ Family ___ Friends ___ Other agency

Are you employed? ___ yes ___ no If employed, # of hours per week ______

Ethnicity ___ Asian ___ Black/AfricanAmerican ___ Hispanic ___ White ___ Multi-racial

Please list, if any not specified above ______________________

Name of High School _________________________ Year Graduated ___________

If GED recipient, year you received your GED ___________

LMC current status ___ freshman ___ sophomore Program of study ___________

I am seeking an Associate Degree ___ Certificate of Completion ___

What is your occupation or job choice? ___________________________________

What do you plan to do after you receive your Associate degree or Certificate of Completion? ___________________________________

What is the highest degree you plan to receive? ____________________________

List all non-school related activities in which you are currently involved

_____________________________________________________________

List all LMC clubs, activities, or groups in which you currently participate

_____________________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation in this study.
Interview Questions
Self-reported factors influencing the retention of non-traditional female students at Lake Michigan College.

High School

How would you describe yourself academically and socially as a high school student?
To what extent did you work or participate in extracurricular activities?
What were your plans following high school?
Were you encouraged to attend college or discouraged from attending college by anyone or anything during your high school years?
Describe any barriers that you felt kept you from attending college.
Under what circumstances, if any, would you have attended college right after high school?
Did you visit Lake Michigan College or receive any information from Lake Michigan College while you were in high school?

Decision to Enroll

At the time you decided to enroll in college what was your life like?
Did anyone or anything influence your decision to enroll and if so, how?
Why did you choose Lake Michigan College? Did you consider attending colleges other than Lake Michigan College?
What led you to enroll at Lake Michigan College on the day you did?
Did you receive support during your enrollment process? If so, how did you feel supported?
Did you feel there were any barriers during your enrollment process? If so, describe any barriers.
When you enrolled at Lake Michigan College what were your goals?
When you enrolled at Lake Michigan College what was your greatest fear?
What adjustments, if any, did you make in your work or family life in order to attend college?

**First Semester**

During your first semester did you ever think that you might have made a mistake in attending college? Why?

To what extent did you work or participate in activities?

What was the most difficult aspect of your first semester in college? What was the easiest?

Did you receive support from anyone or anything inside the college or outside the college during your first semester? Describe how you felt supported.

Did anyone or anything inside the college or outside the college act as a barrier your first semester? Describe how this was a barrier.

After your first semester in college, did you consider leaving? Why?

What factor(s) or supports most influenced your decision to persist?

**First Year**

Describe how you felt at the end of your first year of college classes. Was the second semester different from the first? How were they different?

What was the most difficult aspect of your first year in college? What was the easiest?

To what extent did you work or participate in activities?

After your first year in college, did you consider leaving? Why?

What adjustments, if any, did you make in your work or family life your first year in college?

What factor(s) or supports most influenced your decision to persist?
Current College Status

How would you describe your college experience so far?

What has been the most difficult aspect of your college experience, so far? What has been the easiest?

Describe any support(s) inside the college that have had the most impact on your persistence. Describe any support(s) outside the college that have had the most impact on your persistence.

Describe any barrier(s) inside the college that have had the most impact on your persistence. Describe any barrier(s) outside the college that have had the most impact on your persistence.

Have you revised your educational goals since your first year? Describe any assistance you received in revising your goals.

To what extent do you currently work or participate in activities?

Since your first year in college have you ever not enrolled for Fall or Winter semester? If so, why did you stop out?

What three factors or supports have had the greatest influence on your continued persistence at Lake Michigan College?

What three barriers have had the largest impact on your continued persistence at Lake Michigan College?

What adjustments, if any, have you made in your work or family life since your first year in college?

Can you compare and contrast your feelings when you first arrived at Lake Michigan College to now? Why do you think there is a change?

How do you view yourself as compared with other female students, traditional age and non-traditional age?

What information would you share with new adult female students that you think would help them at Lake Michigan College?

How would you improve the enrollment process for new adult female students?
How would you improve services for all adult women students?

Overall, if you were asked to describe your college experience in three words or less, what would you say?

Are there any questions I should have asked that would let me know more about your experience at Lake Michigan College?

Are there any additional comments you would like to make?
Appendix F

Check List of Services and Programs
Check List
Services or Programs Used at
Lake Michigan College

Please check all services or programs you have used:

___ Admissions
___ Assessment Center
___ Counselor/Advisor
___ Financial Aid Office
___ Career Planning and Placement Center
___ Records Office
___ Business Office/Cashier
___ Faculty Advisor
___ Veterans Affairs Advisor
___ International Student Advisor
___ Kidzone Child Care Center
___ Student Life Office
___ Learning Assistance Center (Tutoring Center)
___ Reading Center
___ Math Center
___ Writing Center
___ On campus computer labs
___ Library
___ Student Lounge Area
___ Fitness/Weight Room
___ Bookstore
___ Campus Pipeline If used, did you use it to register? Yes ___ No ___
___ Special Populations
___ Student Resource Center
___ Educational Opportunity Center
___ Student Support Services
___ TRIO Computer Lab
___ Dean of Student Services
___ Dean of Academic Services
___ Vice-President If checked, which one? _________________________
___ President

Did you ever -
___ Access the LMC website
___ Read the student newspaper – The Wave
___ Attend Student Life Activities
___ Attend the Student Picnic during Opening Days in August
___ Attend any LMC athletic event
___ Attend any LMC student performing arts concerts
___ Attend any LMC theatre productions
___ Use Dial-A-Ride or Berrien Bus
___ Attend any Mendel Center events
___ Attend any workshops
___ Use the ATM

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NAME: Nancy Lynn Johnson

MAJOR: (choose only one)

___ Ed Tech  ___ Ed Leadership  ___ Sec/Adult
___ Elem Ed  ___ G/T Ed   ___ Early Child
___ Elem LD  ___ Sec LD   ___ SpEd PP
___ Read/Lang Arts

TITLE: Self-Reported Factors Influencing the Retention of Non-Traditional Female Students At Lake Michigan College


SUPERVISOR’S SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL

Using the ERIC thesaurus, choose as many descriptors (5-7 minimum) to describe the contents of your paper.

1. Nontraditional students  6. Two year college students
2. Reentry students  7. Women Adult Students
3. Academic persistence  8. Women Students
4. Persistence  9. Adult Learners

ABSTRACT:

Non-traditional female students must simultaneously balance work, family, and educational priorities. Maintaining this tenuous balance is pivotal to persistence. This descriptive study discusses common barriers to persistence and factors supporting persistence as heard through the voices of women students attending a community college.