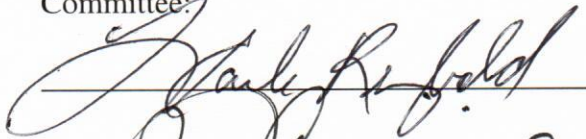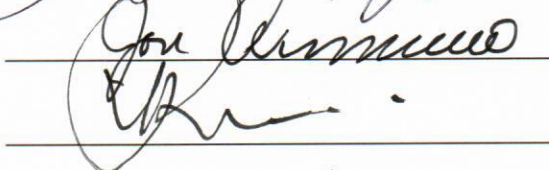# THE ROLE OF HOLISTIC ADVISING IN THE PERSISTENCE OF LOW-INCOME ADULT STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A CASE STUDY

by

Christina Hubbard
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Education

Committee:

_____ Chair

_____

_____

_____ Program Director

_____ Dean, College of Education and Human
Development

Date: _April 19, 2017_____ Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

The Role of Holistic Advising in the Persistence of Low-Income Adult Students in
Community College: A Case Study

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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Christina Hubbard
Master of Education
Regent University, 2008
Bachelor of Arts
University of Maryland, University College, 2004

Director: L. Earle Reybold, Professor
College of Education and Human Development

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the students served by the program in this study. Witnessing firsthand the struggles and sacrifices that many students face in order to provide a better life for themselves and their families inspires me to continue the work I do as a leader in the field of higher education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and colleagues who have made this happen. First, Jason and our incredible children, Ethan and Ellie: thank you! Without your unwavering support and sacrifices over the past six years, I never could have completed this work. I know that I have spent far too many hours behind a computer screen, and we have far too many books spread across our house, but I want you to know that your support was never lost on me. Mom and Dad, I feel this doctorate is as much yours as mine. Your confidence in me drives me to accomplish more. Mom, thank you for cooking nearly every night to allow me to balance my work, studies, and family.

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I would also like to thank my colleagues. The work you all do inspired me to want to learn more about the experiences of our students. Thank you for your patience, support, and resilience as I turned my attention away from our day-to-day and toward this work for an entire year. I would especially like to thank Wende for stepping into my role and taking on those responsibilities that you were only too happy to give back to me at the end of my fellowship. I will never understand how you did that while maintaining a caseload of students who still rose to such impressive accomplishments! Dr. Harper, for being the first to tell me it was time to get this under my belt. Debi, you will never know how much I appreciated the texts of encouragement and the votes of confidence as I worked. Kerin and Steve: thank you for your leadership and encouragement to push to the finish line. Kerin and Drs. DuBois, Templin, Schiavelli, and Ralls: thank you for permitting me to take a full-year fellowship to commit to my studies. I cannot imagine how I would have completed this work without the dedicated time to focus on this research.

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researcher. I believe that the strength of this study is a direct reflection of what you have taught me. Thank you all for your immeasurable support.

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Abstract

THE ROLE OF HOLISTIC ADVISING IN THE PERSISTENCE OF LOW-INCOME ADULT STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A CASE STUDY

Christina Hubbard, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2017

Dissertation Director: Dr. L. Earle Reybold

Employers seek employees with skills that have been correlated with specific credentials including academic certifications, industry certifications, and college degrees. In order to meet these demands, policymakers are pressing higher education institutions to facilitate higher rates of credential completion among college students. This requires targeted support to increase success rates of students among those who can most benefit from credential completion and have historically been vulnerable to dropping out of college. This dissertation is based on a pilot study that was conducted in 2015. Findings describe the role that holistic advising (advising that includes all aspects of college success, such as academic and financial aid advising and student success coaching, as well as personal coaching that includes access to community-based family support services) play on the persistence of low-income adult community college students. This qualitative case study was conducted in a large suburban community in the mid-Atlantic region. Using interviews with eight participants, document analysis, and observations, the study

provides information about how one community college has taken steps to facilitate a more secure foundation for a student population that historically has been unsuccessful in completing credentials. Discussion includes specific strategies and policies that higher education administrators and policymakers can promote to support low-income adult community college students. Recommendations include identified areas for future research.

Chapter One

After a demoralizing failure five years before, Kevin (a pseudonym) was reluctant and afraid to try college again. He recalled the moment he realized a college education was out of reach for him. As he sat in his college mathematics course, mentally and physically exhausted after a 12-hour shift on his feet, he realized he would not fulfill his mother's dream of watching him graduate from college. Kevin did not want to be a disappointment to himself and his family, but he did not see a way to balance work and school.

Kevin had recently graduated from high school and knew the importance of attending college. His mother, a single parent immigrant from Latin America, had encouraged him and his younger brothers to pursue their dreams by attending college. She had not had the opportunity, and saw college as the pathway to a better life, but no one in his family had ever attended, let alone graduated, from college. Looking back, Kevin realizes now that her vision of him enrolling was more of a "pie in the sky kind of dream." As a junior in high school, he was not even sure what a bachelor's degree was.

As the first person in his family to attend college, the culture shock was intense. He described how everything felt overwhelming. Although he participated in a college access program through his high school, he felt like neither he nor his mother knew what questions to ask as he started college. He was unclear about his major and settled on

Liberal Arts. He found selecting classes to be difficult and was not sure how much time or energy was needed for his course work. College was expensive, so in his first semester he paired his ¾-time enrollment with a full-time job to help pay for college and provide for his mother and brothers.

Unfortunately, Kevin's enthusiasm for college and desire to make his dreams a reality proved to be no match for his professional and academic demands. He completed this first semester with a 0.0 grade point average (GPA), failing every course in which he had enrolled. After just one semester, he dropped out and decided to focus on his job. Just a few months later he found out that his 19 year-old girlfriend, Oma, was pregnant with their son.

For the next five years, Kevin worked hard to provide for his young family. His job was physically taxing and, he discovered, afforded very little upward mobility. When Oma decided to pursue her education, he was supportive, yet cautious after his own college experience. He was pleasantly surprised to see his wife tap into a network of support that helped her succeed in college. Although he had dismissed any future college enrollment himself, his wife found a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping teen parents attend college. They had paired her with a mentor who happened to work for the college she attended. This mentor connected Oma to a student services program focused on the needs of adult students where she was assigned her own advisor to advise her academically as well as on financial aid. She was thriving!

Each time Kevin picked up his wife from mentorship, the director of the nonprofit would ask him why he was not participating. With increased prodding, Kevin finally

decided to apply. He still felt insecure, but he recalled his mother's encouragement to fulfill his dream and thought about the fact that now he was not only setting an example for his younger brothers, but also for his son. Uneasy, but hopeful, he too was connected to a mentor who worked for the college he would attend. Like Oma, he joined ALPHA (a pseudonym), a student services program at the college focused on adult students. Kevin attended a workshop where he received one-on-one assistance to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and updated his college application with his most current information.

A few days after the workshop, he met with his college access advisor. He was provided the paperwork he would need to complete in order to qualify for financial aid and was told that his advisor would send the paperwork on to the financial aid office. His advisor asked about his professional plans to determine if there was a short-term training program that might be a good fit for him to earn higher wages while continuing his studies. Kevin explained that due to his previous experience balancing work while attending school he hoped to focus his effort on completing a degree in business as quickly as possible while reducing his professional responsibilities.

A few weeks later, when Kevin and his advisor met to discuss his financial aid award, his advisor informed him that although he had been awarded a sizable financial aid package, including a variety of grants, there was a problem. He was immediately placed on Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) warning. Kevin discovered that he would have financial aid for just one semester before losing it for not successfully meeting the college's standard of a 67% rate of successful course completion. His records

from five years before would be calculated into his total attempted credits, and there was no possible way to achieve a cumulative success rate of 67% in just one semester unless he enrolled in and successfully completed 19 credits.

The slow rate at which Kevin, a working parent, would be able to take classes would prolong his ineligibility to receive aid. It appeared that once again college success was out of reach. His mother's "pie in the sky" dream of watching him graduate college, to set an example and provide a better life for his family, might never come to fruition. His academic missteps from years before would forever be calculated by the financial aid office, preventing him from accessing the aid he needed to attend college and improve the socioeconomic status of his family.

Although this news was devastating, Kevin's advisor provided a ray of hope. If Kevin successfully completed his first semester, there was an appeal process by which he could explain what had happened years before and demonstrate his plans to ensure he would not drop out of college again. If his appeal was approved, ALPHA would serve to provide advice and support regardless of whether the challenges he faced were academic, professional, or personal. With his robust financial aid package along with a scholarship from the nonprofit organization for college-bound teen parents, an advisor who would case manage him throughout his enrollment at the community college, and access to community and social service benefits to manage the financial impact of attending college, Kevin was on his way to fulfilling his dreams for a better life for himself and his family.

Kevin is just one of the students interviewed for this dissertation and his story represents the circumstances of many low-income adult community college students (Helmer, 2013). Without a strong network of support, these students often end up dropping out of college before they can complete an education credential. Existing policies and practices create barriers that are difficult for low-income adult students to overcome in college. However, with a supportive structure in place, Kevin, and countless other students like him, have the chance to reveal that they are mature, responsible students with much to contribute to the college classroom.

Background

Many adult students are returning to community colleges to complete their studies and develop new skills (Helmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2015; Kasworm, 2003). However, policies and procedures exist within higher education that were established during a time when the majority of students who attended college went there directly from high school and were dependent on their parents (Thelin, 2011). The expectation then was that students would attend during fall and spring semesters and go home during the summer. Students would progress through higher education in the anticipated timeframe with complete focus on their college education. Schedules were not intended to accommodate work, and the prospect of juggling family obligations while attending college was less common.

This traditional framework serves as the model at universities that are recognized as the most prestigious higher education institutions, and those schools that fall outside this structure tend to be viewed as less likely to provide a quality education. However,

Mayhew et al. (2016) suggest that this association may have more to do with academic and social engagement of students in higher-renowned institutions. Existing structures and traditions do little to accommodate students who would enter and exit college before completion only to enter again later in life. Returning and adult college students are, quite simply, different than those whom the current higher education system was designed to accommodate (Helmer, 2013).

The factors that contribute to the success of low-income adult students in higher education are often overlooked by existing literature in favor of research on traditional-aged students. When enrollment in higher education is delayed after completion of high school or students drop out to return later, the probability of degree attainment falls significantly (Mayhew et al., 2016). Yet, this population will play a critical role in meeting labor market needs and will need more advanced education and training. The labor market is changing and those in jobs that demand less than a high school education will find they cannot compete without more advanced skills, which will prevent them from earning middle-class wages (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

Many of these prospective college students followed paths that do not include higher education. Some joined the military or the workforce instead of attending college. Others faced challenges that prevented college matriculation such as teen pregnancy, or dropping out of high school. Some did plan to go to college and enrolled, but earned poor grades. Unlike traditional-aged college students, who enter college with a large peer-group, adults who navigate toward alternatives to college may not be aware of the opportunities afforded through higher education.

However, for many individuals who did not complete college as a traditional-aged student, as they mature, they reach a point in their lives when they realize they need advanced education in order to achieve their personal or professional goals. They see higher education as a pathway out of poverty or as an important means by which to set an example for their children (Kasworm, 2003). Unfortunately, some of these individuals are surprised or overwhelmed by the external factors that influence their success in college. Not only do they experience the typical rigors of being a college student, but those challenges are added to the demands of raising a family, maintaining a job or sometimes multiple jobs, and financial struggles (Helmer, 2013; Kasworm, 2003).

Adult students seek institutions that will accommodate the demands on their time by providing low-cost, conveniently located coursework relevant to their interests with flexible class times, and support geared toward adult students (Arcand, 2015; Kasworm, 2003; Pusser et al., 2007). For many low-income students, the local community college is the affordable and most logical option (Jenkins, 2015; Mayhew et al., 2016; Worth & Stephens, 2011).

In the community college environment, the struggles that many students face in the classroom are further complicated by difficulties that are ongoing for them outside of college: high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and unstable housing. Because community colleges enroll the largest share of low-income students (Jenkins, 2015), community college personnel have an opportunity to provide direct support to students who might have been a small proportion of the population at a different institution. In the existing structure of student services, however, campus personnel may not easily be able to see

these obstacles, but they can have a profound effect on students' success and should, therefore, be considered by those who seek higher rates of student persistence and success.

The odds seem long, but with intervention by student services staff, some low-income adult students successfully navigate these challenges. By listening to the experiences of triumphant students in order to learn how they overcame the obstacles that had prevented others from completing college, higher education professionals and policymakers can develop new ways to address the needs of the growing adult student population within higher education institutions (Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Kazis et al., 2007). This dissertation focuses on students who are working toward a dream that may have once felt impossible: completion of a college credential while dealing with the convergence of multiple stressors with which many low-income families must contend.

Historical Perspective

Colleges in the United States were created with the purpose of establishing a place for society's men to gain a liberal arts-centered education to study religion, develop colonial leaders, and "identify and ratify a colonial elite" (Thelin, 2011, p. 25). The first college in what would become the United States, Harvard College, was founded in 1636 (Harvard University, 2015). Liberal arts education for the country's elite dominated higher education curricula well into the 20th century. By the 1920s local "junior colleges" (Thelin, 2011, p. 250) were established to offer the first two years of coursework toward a bachelor's degree. Threatened by the autonomy of these colleges, established institutions pushed for junior colleges to focus on technical programs that offered

terminal credentials rather than preparing for transfer to the university (Thelin, 2011). This emphasis on vocational education shifted again after World War II, when the influx of students led to capacity challenges in higher education systems. The importance of junior colleges, which were more commonly referred to as community colleges, evolved in the 1950s and 1960s. Their missions developed into a combination of their previous foci: serving their local communities to prepare underserved students for transfer and vocational education.

The emphasis on underserved students was not accidental. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a "War on Poverty" (Brauer, 1982; Hannah, 1996; Hansen, 1983; Hatfield, 2003). This declaration fueled the argument for improving access to institutions of higher education. By facilitating access to allow more low-income students gain education and training that would yield higher-paying jobs, significant economic effects could be realized (Hansen, 1983; Thelin, 2011).

Johnson indicated that society had a duty to its citizens to help them benefit from the economic boom that was occurring during the 1960s. Rather than giving money to the poor through welfare programs or government subsidies, the focus shifted to showing them a pathway out of poverty. One of the most effective ways to do this was through education and training (Hansen, 1983).

In 1966, the United States Office of Education released *Equality of Education Opportunity*, also known as the "Coleman Report" (Coleman, 1968; Hansen, 1983). While it was intended to explain the successes and failures of primary and secondary education, the Coleman Report established a framework for the importance of equal

opportunity at all levels of education. Subsequently, federal and state governments instituted the first grant-based financial aid programs to increase access to higher education for disadvantaged populations (Hansen, 1983).

The purpose of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Hannah, 1996; Hansen, 1983; Hatfield, 2003) was to implement loan programs at the federal level. Subsidized loans were available to families with an income of less than $15,000 (Hansen, 1983). There was a small provision for Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants and work-study (Hannah, 1996; Hansen, 1983).

All of these funds were intended to assist low-income students with aptitude for their chosen field. Just two years later, an amendment was drafted that made funds available to all students who qualified and sought them (Hansen, 1983). This change in language heralded a shift away from concern about lost talent from low-income students in specific career fields and toward open access to higher education, regardless of students' intended major.

Opening access to higher education institutions led to an influx of students as well as an increase in the quantity of colleges. In 1960, just 7.7% of the general population had a bachelor's degree (United States Census Bureau, 2010). By 2010, that number had risen to 30% (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Not only did the quantity of students increase; the demographics of students attending college changed as well, representing a far more diverse population in age and other characteristics. In fact, by the year 2000, the enrollment of adult students alone in undergraduate and graduate programs exceeded the total college enrollment recorded in 1968 (Kasworm, 2003).

Significance

Data for the 2013 school year indicated that 27% of students enrolled full-time in two-year public institutions were over the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Additionally, 45% of part-time enrollees were over the age of 25 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). More than 80% of adult students work while they attend college and of those who identify as employees who study, 62% had dropped out without earning a credential after six years in higher education. (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). With such a large proportion of college students from this demographic failing to graduate, coupled with a call from employers to credential more employees, higher education administrators need to better understand what has prevented higher rates of persistence and success among students over the age of 25. One approach to gaining understanding is to review the current climate in higher education and to learn more about strategies that have yielded successful results.

Financial concerns. It is important to note that historically, a significant proportion of the cost of higher education was the burden of the state and federal governments (Thelin, 2011). The cost that students and their parents paid at state institutions was a fraction of the actual cost. In 2012, revenue from tuition and fees amounted to 44% of the operational expenses of public colleges and universities. Twenty-five years before, this share was just 20% (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014). Yet, the investment still pays off. Goldrick-Rab (2016) indicated, "The economic successes of the twentieth century were propelled by investments in education. Now the expected benefits

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of attending college are increasingly outweighed by both the perceived and real costs, especially over the short term" (p. 22).

Over the past four decades the cost of attending community college including tuition, fees, room, and board has increased from just under $6,000 to over $9,000 using constant dollars (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). During the same period, states have reduced their investment in higher education (Quinterno, 2012). In fact, during the Great Recession, while the federal government increased the amount of money committed to financial aid, half of the states reduced need-based aid (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016). In other words, even though the overall investment since 1990 has increased by $10.5 billion, funding per full-time equivalent (FTE) student has decreased by 26.1%.

This financial burden of funding higher education has shifted more significantly onto institutions—a move that has caused colleges to pass the burden on to students, resulting in higher tuition rates. In universities, tuition alone has more than doubled and in community colleges, the costs from 1990 to 2010 increased by 71%. This increase in tuition is problematic because public institutions serve 65.6% of the surge of students who have pursued higher education since 1990. To make matters worse, median household incomes during this period increased by just 2.1% (Quinterno, 2012). The purchasing power of the Pell Grant has been reduced significantly. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) indicated that in the early 1970s Pell Grants covered almost 75% of the costs of attending a public four-year college or university; in the 2010s, it covered less than 33%. This has been demonstrated by data indicating that more than 90% of 2015 Pell Grant recipients graduated with debt from student loans (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Burgeoning costs have drastically increased the need for federal financial aid, but states have not been alone in their deprioritizing of funding higher education. Federal financial aid has shifted significantly from grant aid to loans. The result has been an increase in outstanding loan debt 4.5 times higher than it was in 1999 (Quinterno, 2012).

These changes have made student completion of their programs of study a greater challenge and greater need at the same time. Just 48% of students who begin college attending full-time graduate with any kind of degree or certificate within six years (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Carnevale et al. (2010) reported that "postsecondary education has become the threshold requirement for a middle-class family income" (p. 3). Although the field of higher education has made significant strides toward open access, as demonstrated by the growth of college enrollment, the ability of many students to pay for their education has been impeded.

Low-income students have disproportionately experienced the consequences of these challenges. Research suggests that poor families must spend up to 75% of their household income to send their children to college (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). Low-income adult students feel the same pressures when trying to fund their own education. Low-income adults pursuing higher education are less likely to be married and more than twice as likely to be single parents, when compared to middle- and upper-income adult students. They are also more likely to work in trade fields. Thus, while many wealthier adult students rely on employer tuition reimbursement and the support of their spouse to help financially and with childcare, low-income students are less likely to have this

network of support to help them manage their academic, personal, and professional demands (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007).

To compound these obstacles, since 2000, the poorest members of American society have become increasingly poor. Between 2000 and 2010, average household incomes dropped across all populations in the United States. However, the household incomes of the poorest fifth of society dropped by 14.2% while the richest fifth dropped by just 5.8% (Quinterno, 2012). Not surprisingly, as of 2008, 72% of families in the lowest quintile of the United States' economy possessed less than an associate's degree (Carnevale et al., 2010).

Charting the course. The mismatch between students' expectations of the college experience and reality can be a significant factor in lost motivation and results in lower rates of completion (Bergman, Rose, & Shuck, 2015). While students who come from a college-educated family might also need support to avoid enrollment errors or other common mistakes, they are more likely to have the input of friends or family to offer suggestions or direct them to reach out to an advisor (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who are among the first in their families to attend college do not have the same benefit of others' experiences.

The consequences of some of these mistakes are directly connected to the time in which the error is realized. If much time goes by, it can lead students to significantly increase the time required to complete a credential. The financial effects are also profound because the increased time to credential completion limits professional opportunity and demands more financial aid to cover the additional coursework. In a time

when more students than ever are using federal financial aid, just 38% of adult students complete a credential after six years (Kazis et al., 2007).

This increased time to completion can also have additional dire consequences for these students based on current federal financial aid policies. For example, if a student had attempted two semesters of coursework immediately out of high school at the rate needed to graduate within two years—15 credits per semester—prior to dropping out of college, she would have attempted 30 credits. When she returned to college a decade or more later, even if she was able to successfully appeal the federal financial aid policy that requires 67% of coursework to be successfully completed, she could be affected by the federal financial aid policy that caps financial aid eligibility at 150% of the required credits for the student's program of study, especially if her institution calculates in developmental coursework. Thus, even on an approved appeal of the 67% policy, if none of her credits from those two attempted semesters a decade before are usable at her institution, she would have to be successful in every attempted course and make no enrollment errors in order to still receive aid for her final credits at the college. Anticipating this kind of accuracy for an individual who is attempting to navigate a culture with which she is not familiar is a high expectation.

This argument is not intended to suggest that the existing federal financial aid policy allowing 150% of the credits required for a degree is unfair or illogical. Rather, it is a statement that is intended to emphasize the critical importance of providing an environment for students that minimizes enrollment errors and fosters student success. Programs that have successfully incorporated the existing data about the benefits of

maximizing college access and success to bolster human capital investments must serve as a model for other institutions that have committed to serving low-income adult students. I suggest these efforts are most effectively accomplished via holistic advising programs, because they consider heavily the factors outside of college that influence student success and provide guided support to avoid errors in enrollment.

Programs catered to adult students answer the call. Policymakers throughout the country are placing more emphasis on the need to credential more individuals to fulfill employer demands (Helmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2015). These outcomes can be fulfilled through workforce-recognized credentials, college certificates, or college degrees (Helmer, 2013). However, with current data indicating low rates of overall success in community colleges, it is critical to examine those efforts that are successfully leading students to completion, so that other institutions can replicate their strategies (Jenkins, 2015).

One foundational element in programs designed to foster success is to use an approach that looks beyond the classroom to discover what factors contribute to the persistence of low-income adult students. By learning more about their life situations, prospective obstacles can be mitigated before they can affect students' success. This strategy takes on a more college-driven approach to advising the whole student to facilitate successful academic outcomes.

Another important strategy in these programs is to create a meaningful connection to the college. Connecting students to faculty and staff who can provide guidance and advice demonstrates to students the college's investment in them, which promotes

success among this population (Drake, 2011). These connections can mitigate the fact that adult students are less likely to succeed in the community college environment in comparison to their traditional-aged peers (Bergman et al., 2015; Helmer, 2013) and that they spend less time in on-campus activities (Bergman et al., 2015).

Many factors influence the success of low-income adult learners, but there are strategies that have proven effective in facilitating positive outcomes. Adult students tend to be an independent population (Bergman et al., 2015). As mentioned previously, connection to faculty and staff is important, but it is also beneficial to connect adult students to each other, so they feel like part of a community (Taylor & Heflin, 2015). These connections are further strengthened by a shared purpose. Students thrive when they are in cohorts or peer groups that allow them to feel like others understand their struggles (Helmer, 2013).

Programs that cater to adults can also benefit students by introducing them to stackable credentials within their field of study. These certificates can increase students' employability while they continue their education at the college. These credentials can also improve motivation and ensure that they have some type of employer-recognized certificate to secure employment if they have to leave school prior to completing their ultimate educational goal.

Societal benefits. With few exceptions, American society began opening the doors of higher education institutions to disadvantaged populations during the 20th century, but it was not simply an act of kindness. There are strong economic implications for students pursuing higher education (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, & Trostel, 2009). Low-

income adult students who complete a marketable credential have greater potential to move into family-sustainable careers (Helmer, 2013). In fact, more than 85% of adults who attend college indicate that their college enrollment decision is based on a career goal (Kasworm, 2003).

Building on students' knowledge and skills can lead to higher-wage employment, which allows them to become more financially independent and contribute more tax revenue to the national economy (Jenkins, 2015). This revenue can be used to fund other low-income families find a path to financial security. In other words, not only are colleges improving the quality of life for their students; the higher-paying jobs their graduates enter generate taxes to provide opportunity to other low-income families (Carnevale et al., 2010). Furthermore, higher rates of college participation in under-represented populations promote a college-going culture in communities where it may not have previously existed (Bergman et al., 2015).

Higher education institutions have undergone rampant expansions to serve a far broader population than they served just a generation ago. This transformation demands different resources to ensure that the students who are entering the institutions will persist to successful credential completion. With increased access to higher education for low-income students who do not come from a college-going culture, education administrators need to determine the best way to support these students and ensure they complete the programs they begin (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). In order to better understand what is working for those who succeed, it is beneficial to hear directly from adult students about

how the resources or interventions that have been introduced are affecting their experiences.

Purpose

This dissertation demonstrates how experiences were different for adult students at one community college. The purpose of this study is to describe, from the perspective of students, the role of holistic advising in the persistence of low-income adult students in community colleges. I begin by providing an overview of the topic and statement of problem. I then present the literature that describes the existing situation for adult students and I provide an argument for the importance of better understanding how some low-income students overcome the obstacles that have stopped so many others from achieving successful outcomes in higher education. I justify why learning about their lived experiences as adult students in community college can and should influence those who seek to increase student persistence and success within this population.

After discussing the challenges that adult community college students face, I explain how holistic advising programs address these needs. Holistic advising programs provide an avenue by which more adult students can achieve program completion because of guided support that recognizes the attributes adult students bring to higher education. Holistic advising also places an emphasis on credit for prior learning and credentials that build on each other, often referred to as stackable credentials. This dissertation includes literature related to why investment in this population is important for society, and it details the outcomes that can be achieved by guiding high-risk adult students through their educational experience.

After I have reviewed the existing literature on this topic, I explain why I selected case study as my method and what I intended to accomplish in my study. I describe how this method effectively brought forth the data sought and I provide a detailed explanation of the approach used by the program from which the participants were selected. Next, I address discuss the implications of this work and my personal perspective and reflexivity.

In the fourth chapter, I present the data from the interviews conducted with participants. I begin by introducing the themes and follow up by providing a summary of each participant's interview. After reviewing the data, I discuss the themes that were generated across the interviews in greater detail.

The fifth chapter focuses on discussion of the findings and what the findings mean for scholarship in this area. I tie the themes back to the literature discussed in the second chapter and indicate where this work fits within the literature. I also discuss limitations of the work and recommend areas for future research. The conclusion of this work includes recommendations for practice.

Research Questions

Case research is used to understand an issue. It is not uncommon in a case study for research questions to evolve throughout the research process (Stake, 1995). Although I went into this research confident that I had four strong research questions, as I analyzed the data, I discovered that I was actually most interested in two key areas. I narrowed my questions to elucidate the tenets of what makes students in ALPHA successful and which polices or procedures affect their persistence. In light of this foundation, the research questions that drive this study are the following:

1. From the students' perspectives, how do elements of holistic advising (such as single-source academic advising, financial aid advising, and public benefits access) affect low-income community college students?

2. From the students' perspectives, which community college policies or procedures have the most significant influence on their student experience?

Definition of Terms

Terminology related to higher education is often applied broadly and I would like to be clear about how I use certain words throughout the remainder of this project.

Adult student: With few exceptions, ALPHA used the federal financial aid definition for "Independent Students" to determine whether applicants possessed qualities of adult students. This definition is as follows: An independent student is one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, or someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless ("Independent Student," n.d.).

FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid ("FAFSA," n.d.). This application is used nationwide to award students federal financial aid.

Holistic advising: An approach to advising that is developing in higher education. In an extensive search for this term, I found just one reference to holistic advising. Schroeder and Terras (2015) defined holistic advisors as those who provide students "good programmatic guidance they could trust, care about them as

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individuals, and remain readily available with timely responses. In sum, students

need their advisors to demonstrate all these qualities, not parts of the whole" (p.

48). I also include all of those elements in my definition of holistic advising, and

extend the meaning beyond the academic environment to include personal and

professional circumstances that could affect academic persistence.

Low-income: This term has many definitions. For the purposes of this project, low-

income is used to describe students who are financially Pell Grant eligible, even if

they are ineligible for a Pell Grant due to nonfinancial reasons. This includes

students who do not qualify for aid because they have a degree from a foreign

country.

Part-time student: A student who is taking less than 12 credit hour per semester

(Baldwin, 2010).

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP): A school's standards for satisfactory academic

progress toward a degree or certificate offered by that institution ("Satisfactory

Academic Progress," n.d.). At the institution where the study was conducted rigid

guidelines are upheld regarding grade point average (GPA), completion rate,

maximum timeframe, and developmental coursework maximums. Only

extenuating circumstances are considered during an appeal process for students

who fail SAP.

Stackable credentials: Credentials that can build on each other to demonstrate accruing

competencies. This allows vulnerable students to move in and out of the

education system with documented milestones of accomplishment. The earliest

reference I was able to find on stackable credentials was in a 2007 brief

highlighting community college exemplars that had established programs and

practices to support low-income adults to earn a family-sustaining wage (Park,

Ernst, & Kim 2007).

Holistic advising. As I described in the definition above, holistic advising is an

emerging approach to advising, and due to its importance in this study, I want to explain

this approach more fully. Holistic advising, as it is operationalized by the program from

which all participants in this study were selected, applies Schroeder and Terras's (2015)

tenets, but goes a bit deeper. Students in this program work very closely with a few

people throughout their experience at this community college. The program does this

through extensive cross-training of staff that incorporates identified problem areas for

this population: financial aid advising (Hatfield, 2003; Milheim & Bichsel, 2007),

academic advising that includes articulation of prior learning into college credit (Milheim

& Bichsel, 2007), enrollment and admissions (Helmer, 2013), and knowledge of

community-based resources that can stabilize domestic situations for low-income

families (Helmer, 2013).

Holistic advising as a strategy is evolving in colleges across the United States

(e.g., *Adult Focus* at University of Akron, CalWORKS at Chaffey College, and

SparkPoint at Skyline College). However, most institutions have not actually taken steps

to identify the approach, opting instead to simply describe the services offered.

Organizations such as the Working Family Success Network (2014) and Achieving the

Dream (2015) are proponents of approaches that involve facilitating, or directly

providing, access to services that address various needs of low-income students.

The confluence of circumstances that have brought greater quantities of low-income adult students into higher education demands attention. This is the time for a study into the experiences that differentiate those low-income adult students who succeed. In the next section, I review existing literature on this issue to establish the foundation of this project.

Chapter Two

Community colleges have been asked to do more for their burgeoning populations with fewer resources (Helmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2015). The students who choose to attend community colleges rely on finding strong academic programs with an affordable price. Financially strapped community colleges are faced with increasing financial challenges as funding cuts are made at the state and federal levels (Helmer, 2013; Hunter & White, 2004; Jenkins, 2015; Quinterno, 2012; Wilson, Hu, Basham, & Campbell, 2015). These cuts translate to fewer resources injected into improving student outcomes and experiences. Meanwhile, community colleges' for-profit competitors attract students by providing individualized support throughout the matriculation and enrollment processes (Arcand, 2015). More than ever, data to track student outcomes are essential.

In light of these financial pressures while competing with for-profit schools, the need to effectively serve students who choose to attend community colleges is greater than ever. Community college administrators must create environments that address the broad range of academic student preparedness and diversity (Jenkins, 2015; Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). In this way, community colleges can serve all students, including adults and those who struggle academically—a population that has not been well-served by the for-profit sector.

Higher education institutions across the country have, in general, taken steps to increase their competitiveness by implementing strategies to address identified completion challenges (Jenkins, 2015; Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). Some of the most recent strategies that directly affect adult students include the introduction of pathway programs, developmental education redesign (Achieving the Dream, 2015), and assessment for prior learning (Bergman et al., 2015). Each of these efforts addresses a vulnerability or area that has been associated with students leaving their institutions (Bergman et al., 2015; Milheim & Bichsel, 2007).

Reshaping community colleges to include these elements supports low-income adult students and is an important factor in facilitating student persistence and success (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). That said, the benefits of such initiatives extend far beyond graduation rates of disadvantaged populations. They also contribute to community colleges' competitiveness in the marketplace. Supporting low-income adult students through credential completion benefits the entire community. Some research points to tax advantages and societal gains of having a more highly educated population (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2015; Quinterno, 2012). Carnevale et al. (2010) pointed to the greater concern of a skills gap that is quickly developing in the United States' economy, a problem to which these types of programs may offer a solution.

The following literature review identifies the influx and associated needs of adult students in higher education. This section includes relevant literature about how these students approach their college experience differently than traditional college students,

and the factors that affect their outcomes. It then highlights the evolution of advising as a practice.

Holistic advising is an emerging strategy. In a web-based search through my university library of online databases with no limiting criteria, I found just one reference to "holistic advising" in Schroeder and Terras, 2015. Thus, rather than providing the traditional review and critique of the literature associated with this concept, I demonstrate how holistic advising practices as I defined them in Chapter 1 fulfill adult-student needs identified within the literature. I also describe the role of the advisor in a holistic advising program. Finally, I discuss how policies and practices have both intended and unintended consequences, especially on the higher education experience for low-income adult students.

The Return of Adult Students to Higher Education

Adult students' challenges are often more complex than those of traditional college students (Capps, 2012) and this population is growing on college campuses. In fact, from 2011 to 2022, the rate of enrollment among 18 to 24 year olds is expected to increase by 9% while the projected increase between 25 to 34 year olds is projected to increase by 20%. Rates among those age 35 and older are projected to increase by 23% during this timeframe (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

As the volume of adult students entering institutions of higher education increases, which results in an increasing proportion of the overall student body, college staff must prepare to address the needs and obstacles many of these students face (Bergman et al., 2015; Capps, 2012; Noel-Levitz & The Council for Adult and

Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2005). Adult students come to college with an impressive amount of diversity in their backgrounds and experiences (Bland, 2003; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). It is important to note, however, that age itself is not an indicator of whether a student will complete his or her educational goal. The effect of factors associated with adulthood such as professional obligations or parenting have a greater influence on student persistence (Bergman et al., 2015).

Many low-income adult students view themselves as workers who go to school (Bergman et al., 2015; Berker et al., 2003; Hall, 2015). In fact, in one study, two-thirds of employed students said work was their primary activity. The balance between being a good student and being a good employee, then, lean more heavily toward employment. This is demonstrated by research that compares those students who view themselves as employees first and students second, against those who view themselves as students who work. Sacrifices among employee-students tend to be made in their academic pursuits rather than in their employment, resulting in low rates of persistence and completion of credentials (Berker, et al., 2003).

A related factor that can influence adult students' persistence is the rate of enrollment. Part-time enrollment is the only way for many adult students to take college classes due to their need to work in order to provide for their families. However, part-time enrollment is directly correlated to lower rates of persistence (Bergman et al., 2015). Many of these students struggle academically, and they are less likely than other community college students to earn a degree or credential (Bergman et al., 2015; Helmer, 2013). Although part-time enrollment allows more students to access higher education,

the probability of completing a credential decreases with less than full-time enrollment (Bergman et al., 2015). Higher education administrators must address this situation in order to create more ways for adult students to succeed in college.

Adult students have had varying life experiences that contribute to their decision to return to college (Bland, 2003; Worth & Stephens, 2011). This population may include people experiencing job loss or optional career transitions, individuals who delayed their education while raising children, those who are preparing for retirement but have realized they need to work for a few more years, or those who needed to work immediately after high school and are now able to incorporate attending college into their lives (Bland, 2003). In light of the variability of the reasons adult students attend college, it is beneficial to better understand how factors such as stress and the college environment can affect this population.

Stress as an influence in higher education. Most adult students have different demands on their time than traditional-aged college students, resulting in increased external pressure while pursuing their academic goals (Giancola et al., 2009). Many are working full-time jobs, balancing family activities, and attempting to fit college into an already full schedule (Willans & Seary, 2011; Worth & Stephens, 2011). This maturity also leads them to demand more control over their educational experience (Wilson et al., 2015).

As adult students face challenges in managing personal, professional, and academic demands, there may also be emotional obstacles. Willans and Seary (2011) and Bland (2003) noted that the return to a formal educational environment may elicit a sense

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of anxiety and stress for many adult students. It may also cause concerns related to their self-esteem (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). At the same time, it can be a period of excitement and empowerment. This mix of emotions can be overwhelming for students and can lead to a sense of overstimulation and stress as they adapt to their new surroundings.

In 2009, Giancola et al. conducted a study to test a stress model that would use appraisal and coping to mitigate negative stress and psychosocial outcomes on adults pursuing higher education. This study provided an evidence-based foundation for the importance of controlling the influence of stress on adult students. They pointed out its negative impact on adult student persistence and delved into the conflict many adult students experience related to the multiple roles they maintain as students, parents, and professionals.

Their first task was to categorize the potential stressors that were likely to influence adult students: "Work Demands, Personal Demands, School Demands, Family–School Conflict, School–Family Conflict, Work–School Conflict, and School–Work Conflict" (Giancola et al., 2009, p. 248). They explained that within their hypothesized model, adults will naturally evaluate the stressors in their lives to determine whether they are negative or positive factors. If they are negative, the psyche will view them as a threat. On the other hand, positive stressors are viewed as obstacles over which the adult student can prevail.

The stressor evaluation process continues after the student has determined whether a circumstance is threatening or challenging. If it is simply challenging, the adult

student's psyche will attempt to cope with the stress by adapting. However, if the situation is threatening, the psyche will use maladaptive techniques that could prove harmful to the student. This was valuable research, because it explained adult student perceptions of the stressors in their lives and indicated that those stressors that are viewed as positive can be overcome (Giancola et al., 2009).

Giancola et al.'s (2009) study sought to identify how this evaluation process influences the general life satisfaction and mental well-being of the adult student. In other words, they followed students' perceptions of a stressor to determine how the conflict was categorized, whether it was resolved using adaptive or maladaptive strategies, and its effect on satisfaction and well-being. The findings of this study concluded that work stress has the greatest correlation to general well-being. This may be the strongest indicator of stress, because it is the factor over which the adult student has least control. Their results suggest that a supportive home environment and minimal conflict between school and work are important elements to minimizing the negative influence stress can play on the adult student (Giancola et al., 2009).

The importance of stress in the workplace and support at home may appear to suggest that there is little that higher education administrators can do to support adult students. Instead, the data demonstrate that there is a void to be filled by higher education educators, advisors, and administrators. Adult students can be served by preparing them to anticipate these stressors, so they are viewed as challenges that can be overcome rather than threats to students' well-being. Providing them with strategies to take proactive steps can serve to address potential problems.

The college environment. Although adult students may exhibit a high level of stress due to the complexity of their lives while they study, the college environment can also influence the ability of adult students to succeed. Unfortunately, even as the adult student population grows, the college classroom has remained traditional in terms of when most full-time faculty teach, student services offerings, and academic resources available to students (Helmer, 2013; Kazis et al., 2007). Additionally, the strategies that have been put in place for all adult students may fall short of the more intensive needs of low-income adult students. The added levels of stress, financial pressures, and cultural differences may be more profound among low-income students as compared to other adult students and should be considered in the development of comprehensive programs (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007).

In discussing needs among low-income single-mothers, Arcand (2015) explained that low-income students are often attending expensive for-profit institutions instead of their community colleges. One of the reasons they make this choice is because the for-profit institutions more effectively demonstrate their convenience for adult students. She highlighted extensive research indicating students' identified obstacles include factors such as balancing professional, academic, and personal demands; securing reliable childcare; and accessing transportation; and that the current systems in place in most nonprofit colleges do little to address these concerns.

Additional research supports Arcand's (2015) findings that nonprofit colleges have been slow in addressing these needs. The lack of attention to these issues contributes to the fact that adult students face grave odds in graduating from college at

all. Although they generally enter college with a higher aptitude and maintain higher GPAs in college, they tend to take longer to complete a credential and are more likely to withdraw prior to graduation (Capps, 2012). In one of the studies in which researchers looked at whether students identified themselves as "students who work" or "employees who study" those who identified as the latter group were far less likely to persist. After six years of postsecondary studies, a surprising 62% of them had fallen short of completing a degree or certificate and had, in fact, discontinued their enrollment as compared to 39% of "students who worked" (Berker et al., 2003). Although higher education as a field has demonstrated reluctance to implement changes and improve processes (Wilson, 2010), with noncompletion rates exceeding completion rates, it is clear that something must be done to address the disconnect between these students' aptitude and performance.

Capps's (2012) study of adult student persistence in a Western community college identified multiple factors that affect student experience by conducting multiple interviews across semesters to track persistence of a small group of adult students. Among the reasons to which these adults attributed nonpersistence were circumstances outside the agency of the college or university. Factors such as job loss or health were indicated as reasons for dropout. Students who continued their enrollment identified influences such as familial support among their reasons for remaining in school. Although participants associated their persistence with determinants outside of the college, the research also indicated that participants mention teachers and advisors with

whom they connected as contributing to their sentiments and decisions about college (Capps, 2012).

Capps's (2012) work also discussed other institutional factors that have been noted to influence adult students' success, and highlighted the controversy over developmental coursework. Some institutions demand that students complete developmental coursework before they can register in credit-bearing courses. Capps noted that this leads to the inability of students to apply the knowledge gained in developmental classes until future semesters. Other institutions allow students to enroll in credit-bearing courses concurrently with developmental coursework, which allows students to demonstrate capability that may not have been indicated on the test. Subsequently, Capps's recommendation for adult students in community colleges was that institutions establish learning communities that combine the developmental classes and credit-bearing classes to allow application of content in an environment where skill development is anticipated. In so doing, the negative influence on financial aid and time to graduation can be mitigated.

Capps's participants indicated that participation in developmental courses proved beneficial because adult students acquired a mindset that promoted success in college. Participants saw improvement by simply attending class: "completing assignments; getting used to deadlines; and interacting with dedicated, inspiring, caring teachers" (2012, p. 42). The course structure and interaction with classmates and faculty-fostered development of this college-student mindset aided them in subsequent classes. Although there is research that contradicts these outcomes (e.g. Crisp & Delgado, 2014), it is

possible that this specific population, adult community college students, benefit from this approach.

The approach that faculty and staff use in their interactions with students can also play a role in the persistence of adult students. Milheim and Bichsel (2007) explained that faculty should be made aware of the challenges that affect low-income adult students, so they can prepare for adjustments such as alternate office hours. Another conclusion from Capps's (2012) study supported other research suggesting that adult students persist at higher rates when validation practices are used. These practices include using encouraging remarks, using students' names regularly, and spending time listening to them.

As mentioned previously, adult students introduce a larger confluence of circumstances that could prevent them from completing their intended credentials when compared to their traditional-aged peers. As such, it is beneficial to better understand how stress and the institutional environment affect adult student success.

Development of a Holistic Advising Approach to Serve Adult Students

Malcom Knowles was a pioneering and influential leader in the development of adult education as a field. He worked to define and articulate the fundamentals that have shaped this domain. In 1957, Knowles suggested that adult education is about liberation and personal growth and indicated "adult educators are in the business of helping individuals become liberated" (p. 238). It is not up to the educator to define what that liberation would mean for the student. Instead of defining what doors education would open for the adult student, he suggested that educators focus on from what this liberation

freed the student. Thus, if students lack specific skills to advance and they gain them through higher education, the educator has freed them from the confines of immobility that had existed without advanced education.

This philosophy demands that those who work with adult students do less directing than they would with traditional-aged students. Instead, those who work with adults need to focus on facilitating rich opportunities for students to determine for themselves their goals and why they want to achieve them. Students need to reach their own conclusions, but they need information and support that can be provided by an informed expert.

Knowles's work dominated the field through the 1980s and established a framework for understanding adult education. Knowles's research was widely accepted and few critiques of his work led to widespread adaptation of his theories. By the late-1980s and 1990s, more research began to indicate his approach was overly simplified and made too many generalized assumptions about adult learners (Darbyshire, 1993). While adults have distinct differences from children and young adults, to make broad assumptions about this population is limiting and inaccurate. This is why a more holistic model that recognizes the individual and considers their unique needs is valuable in working with adult students.

In my efforts to find literature on holistic advising, Schroeder and Terras's (2015) article was the only result in my search. They observed that prior to their own work "no one has looked at advising as a holistic practice" (p. 42), and their research concluded that "quality advising is holistic" (p. 48). They explained that the participants in their

phenomenological study expressed reliance upon their advisors for overall quality, which they described as demanding a combination of personal attributes such as "passion" and "vested interest and belief in practice" (p. 48) as well as consistently providing accurate advice. Schroeder and Terras's (2015) work resulted in five themes inherent in good advising: programmatic guidance, trustworthiness, an individualized approach, importance of the information delivered, and flexible/responsive communication. This research, however, was focused on adult graduate students and good advising for that population specifically. There was no indication of whether the resulting themes of their research could be applied to adult undergraduate students as well.

Holistic advising as I define it in this dissertation brings together the importance of personal growth for adult students that Knowles introduced along with multiple existing advising strategies. These advising strategies include prescriptive, developmental, and intrusive advising. Holistic advising also places particular emphasis on components from outside the institution that may affect the adult student's college experience.

Among the key elements of this holistic approach are providing clear responses to students' inquiries about the required coursework to complete a credential, the foundation of prescriptive advising (King, 2005), while concurrently teaching and empowering the student, which are important facets of developmental advising (King, 2005). It is also critical to proactively reach out to the student, a component of intrusive advising (Miller & Murray, 2005).

Holistic advisors do not look exclusively at the student's curricular needs. They need to additionally identify factors that might not be obvious to most college advisors. Schroeder and Terras (2015) indicated that holistic advisors need to "intentionally seek understanding about the distinct needs" of their students (p. 51). Similarly, in ALPHA advisors were expected to delve deeply to address student needs directly and through connections to other resources. The advisors were prepared to facilitate access to social service benefits, address emergency housing needs, identify childcare resources, provide information about financial literacy, or resolve food insecurity. Advising to address (versus simply recognize) factors that occur outside the college is not an element that has typically been included in prescriptive, developmental, or intrusive academic advising methods.

This distinction, in attending to the lives of students outside the classroom, is fundamental to providing support to low-income adult students. Socioeconomic status is an important indicator in predicting adult student persistence (Bergman et al., 2015). If students are concerned about basic needs of survival, it is unrealistic to believe they can focus on their academic success. For low-income students, struggles as common as a canceled baby-sitter or a flat tire can have devastating effects. Bergman et al. (2015) explained not only that overall financial well-being predicts adult student persistence, but also that access to financial assistance correlates to higher rates of credential completion.

Resources to provide a secure foundation for low-income adult students exist. However, the lack of coordinated effort between colleges and community programs leads to missed opportunities to address these challenges. Confusion exists among many

college administrators about which services can be used by students. Yet, these tools can provide the exact support that would prevent low-income adult students from dropping out of college (Smith, 2015).

History of academic advising. Advising as a profession has evolved extensively over the past few decades. For much of the 20th century, advising was viewed as an information-delivery profession. The college advisor provided information about what the student needed to do in order to complete his or her program of study. The relationship was transactional, and any advisor in the institution could provide the same information. Faculty members or professional advisors provided this service. However, in 1957, a leader in adult education suggested that students could benefit from more robust service: "It is…by developing skillful and objective guidance services as an integral element of adult education that I see our greatest hope for achieving a system that serves both the needs of the individuals and the requirements of society" (Knowles, 1957, p. 240).

By 1972, a more comprehensive approach was forming. Advising was still focused predominantly on the college experience, but with a broader context than before. O'Banion identified academic advising as including the "following dimensions:

(1) Exploration of life goals

(2) Exploration of vocational goals

(3) Program choice

(4) Course choice, and

(5) Scheduling courses" (O'Banion, 1972, p. 62).

Quality in academic advising has long stood as a cornerstone of the profession. By 1977, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was created to serve as a community for those who advise professionally. With the introduction of a federal financial aid program, the 1970s brought far broader student diversity to higher education institutions (Thurmond & Miller, 2006). The association has now grown to more than 11,000 members and functions as a platform for idea sharing and discussion of academic advising issues (NACADA, 2014a).

In 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was created to establish a framework that promoted quality in the field by forming a consensus on the standards with input from member associations and experts. These guidelines are intended to respond in real time to changes that may occur in the higher education community. CAS developed standards of practice for academic advising in 1986 and has updated them regularly since that time (CAS, 2015).

While high levels of quality in the field have long been valued in this profession, responsiveness to the needs of students is also an important factor in academic advising. In 1984, Winston and Sandor conducted a study that conclusively indicated students preferred a developmental advising approach wherein the advisor and student have strong rapport that facilitated a problem-solving and learning relationship. This approach was further refined and by the 1990s the developmental advising model emphasized the needs of college students and the decisions they made. This model incorporated theory that addressed specific populations, but also applied cognitive developmental theory,

psychosocial theory, and person–environment interaction theory across all student populations (Miller & Murray, 2005).

The developmental model sought to explore the specific reasons behind students' decisions about their education. This information was used as a teaching tool to demonstrate to students how efforts in identifying, analyzing, evaluating, and deciding on a program could be applied on a larger scale to develop a plan for the life they wanted to lead. This process demonstrated that teaching students responsibility and valuable life skills could occur outside the classroom (Miller & Murray, 2005).

Developmental advising is an effective model when students are engaged with, and self-refer to, their advisor. As early as 1976, however, Glennen explained that in an academic setting, proactive outreach—referred to as "intrusive"—is necessary to connect with students. Students could not be left to reach out to their advisors independently. Glennen also distinguished the difference between advising and counseling, and emphasized that efficacy is gained through advising that is more like counseling, rather than prescriptive advising.

Glennen (1976) described an intervention that occurred at a university using faculty to cross-train as intrusive academic counselors, and the results were impressive. More than 74% of students who were at-risk saw their intrusive academic counselor and subsequently passed the semester. This was part of a larger approach to better serve all students and the methods of this approach were applied to other populations at the institution as well. Students who were on the dean's Honor List received special accolades as academic counselors made a special effort to reach out to and congratulate

or encourage those high-performing students (Glennen, 1976). These connections demonstrated the influence that interested and cross-trained staff have on the success of students.

These results were consistent with Capps's (2012) work, which indicated that words of encouragement and support resulted in a positive correlation with student persistence. In Glennen's (1976) study, the first-year attrition rate dropped from 45% to 6%, and the quantity of students who sought psychological help from the campus clinic reduced significantly. Glennen suggested that issues that were typically problematic were resolved via intrusive counseling before they became crises. In Glennen's study, the academic advising approach demanded committed faculty members who had been released from their teaching loads and received extensive professional development. However, it demonstrated that when students have a strong rapport with informed staff who proactively engage students, all students benefit, and even the most vulnerable can succeed (1976).

More recently, this method has been reclassified as proactive advising, instead of intrusive advising (NACADA, 2014b). This strategy puts more pressure on college staff to conduct outreach to students, but it creates an environment where students know the college is invested in their success. As Glennen's work suggested, intrusive or proactive advising produces great results for students.

Although the results of developmental and intrusive/proactive advising have been promising, numerous at-risk students still drop out of college. Students leave for a multitude of reasons, and many of these factors occur outside the college. Yet, the focus

of the aforementioned advising strategies is still limited to the college and the student, and students are expected to prevent crises in other parts of their lives from influencing their college success.

Holistic advising in the currently researched program. In the approach that I refer to as holistic advising, advisors take advising further than developmental or intrusive/proactive advising. They begin by working with students to identify potential obstacles that exist in the students' professional or personal environments that may affect their success in college. Advisors discuss concerns about childcare and work stability alongside discussions of the quantity of credits the students feel they can take. In ALPHA, the holistic advising program used in this study, advisors work flexible hours and leave campus to meet with students in their places of employment or in remote campus locations to better connect with students where the students can most easily access their college representative.

In a holistic advising model, meeting with one's advisor does not always require an in-person interaction. Often times, holistic advisors will connect with students via email, Web-based chat services, or by phone. The mission is not to physically connect the students to the college, but rather to ensure they feel interpersonally connected to their college through their holistic advisor.

Academic advising has evolved significantly over its history. The professional community evolved to become more responsive to the needs of students and has changed to better serve them. Academic advising is at the advent of a new era in which the

obstacles that students face outside of their college experience need to be addressed by those professionals who have been tasked with facilitating student success.

The Argument for Holistic Advising Programs for Adult Students

Vincent Tinto was widely revered for demonstrating the importance of connection between students and their institutions. His career emphasized the sense of community as being a key contributor in their college success. In his 1998 work, Tinto indicated that students who feel valued by their college community are more likely to persist than those who do not have a significant level of social or academic integration with this community. Similarly, students who possess both social and academic integration are even more likely to persist than those who have just one form of connection.

Tinto's conclusions are widely accepted and supported by other research in the field of higher education. Students in general are far more likely to succeed in higher education when they feel connected to the college (Bergman et al., 2015; Drake, 2011; Glennen, 1976; Miller, 2012; Thomas & Minton, 2004). This connection may occur through an advisor, faculty member, or other staff member at the college, but Hunter and White (2004) suggested that interaction with an academic advisor may be the only long-lasting relationship students develop with college staff. This is caused by the short-term relationship typical between faculty and students as well as the transactional relationship of many student services, which inhibits the development of longer relationships.

Academic advisors, however, have the opportunity to work with students semester after semester. They often serve as a resource to provide guidance and navigational support not only in the classroom, but around campus (Bergman et al., 2015). Holistic

advising programs in which students are assigned to a single advisor who is committed to serving them throughout their program can be used to connect adult students, who might otherwise have attempted to work independently yet unsuccessfully, to critical college staff.

Connecting students to the college. Fostering a strong connection between college staff and students early is important. Capps's (2012) work addressed the role that advisors play in connecting students to their college, and looked specifically at adult student persistence in community colleges. This research indicated that "dismissive attitudes" among advisors led some students to leave the college (Capps, 2012, p. 50). Participants expressed that they believed that not having a connection to college staff was a risk factor for noncompletion.

In separate interview questions, Capps (2012) sought to learn how invested students felt in their college. One of the interview questions asked whether, if the college where the study took place were a club, they considered themselves members. Although most participants indicated that they did feel that they would be members, they also explained that their involvement came at a significant expense, not only financially, but also in terms of time and energy. Some described that they would consider themselves paying members, but not necessarily participating members. One said it was like belonging to a church, but not worshipping outside of a weekly service.

Students in Capps's (2012) study indicated recognition that there were ways to feel more involved or connected to their college, such as attending sporting events or joining clubs. Although students in this adult student population said they rarely see

enough value in attending extracurricular activities to justify the time required, they described caring faculty and staff as important factors in their satisfaction with their community college experience in this study. For this reason, the interpersonal connections that adult community college students make are valuable. In other words, the data from these interviews indicated that while many adult community college students do not feel much connection to the college as its own entity, they felt significant connection to individuals who worked for the college (Capps, 2012).

Adults experience college independently. Adult students view their college experience through a different lens than their traditional-aged peers. For example, some adult students indicate they want better advising, but they view the relationship as transactional, succinct, and customer service-like while traditional students see it as more personal and formational (Bergman et al., 2015). For many adult students, fostering the type of connection that faculty or advisors develop with traditional-aged college students takes too much time and effort (Arcand, 2015; Wilson, 2010).

The academic advising community must interrupt adult students' perspectives that advisors should only provide curricular information and that quality advising is time-consuming with minimal benefit. This would allow for better interpersonal connections and improve outcomes for adult students who might otherwise have sought to avoid the advising relationship because they felt competent enough to select their own courses.

The same self-reliance that leads many adult students to self-advise is demonstrated throughout their college experience. Adult students indicate they do not have time to learn about what the campus has to offer (Arcand, 2015). More than other

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students, adults tend to be very independent and hold themselves accountable for their successes and failures, rather than shifting blame to faculty or the institution. Thus, lack of connection to college faculty and advisors may be one of the largest barriers to successful credential completion (Bergman et al., 2015; Hunter & White, 2004).

When adult students do not succeed, they feel personally responsible and may lose confidence in their ability to study (Owen, 2002). In fact, in Capps's (2012) study, students who claimed responsibility for their own persistence did not expect much from, or give much time or credit to, advisors. While this independence can be quite advantageous in many circumstances, it may lead to a false sense of competence in the college environment. Without a connection to college staff who can strategize a plan for success and provide recommendations, this population is vulnerable to the new challenges they will face during their college experience (Miller 2012; Thomas & Minton, 2004).

Holistic advising programs can facilitate success for adult students. The positive characteristics and attributes of adult students in higher education are clear. Typically, they go to college on their own accord and are, therefore, highly motivated students. Their life experiences contribute new perspectives to classroom discussion, and they have much to gain from the college experience.

Although adult students make up over 30% of the undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), the independence they demonstrate combined with the short amount of time they spend on campus outside of class can contribute to a sense that they lack peers on campus. Therefore, community building is

one of the fundamental reasons to justify a holistic advising model to serve low-income adult students. A holistic advising program can serve to connect adult students to informed staff within the college while connecting adult students to their peer community. This can overcome the impression that they must independently face the challenges that attending college will bring.

Using engagement in a holistic advising program to mitigate risk factors among entry characteristics. Establishing a community of adult learners brings together a variety of perspectives and experiences and allows for the group to support each other in their collective experience as adult college students. Fostering these connections to the college and peers can facilitate success in ways that may not be immediately obvious. Bergman et al. (2015) highlighted a variety of entry characteristics that have been negatively correlated to the success of adult students. These factors include: lack of educational attainment of parents, lack of credit for prior learning, low educational goals, parenting obligations, low socioeconomic status, and a gap between the expectations of the learner and reality.

Struggles to connect can be overcome by pulling the adult student population together. This community of learners serves as a catalyst for inspiring higher rates of persistence as adult students work toward graduation through information sharing and support for each other. For example, adult students are more likely than traditional-aged college students to be the first generation in their families to attend college and parents' low rates of educational attainment have been demonstrated to have a negative correlation to adult student persistence (Bergman et al., 2015). Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016)

suggested this is due to the lack of "know-how (conferred by cultural and social capital) to navigate the complexities involved in attending and financing college" (p. 1,766).

In other words, without an intervention to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed, adult students are more likely to succumb to the negative consequences of their existing culture. Many adult students lack a support structure to inform their navigation of the higher education environment. They may struggle more with course selection, anticipating the workload associated with enrollment, or integrating into the college community due to a misalignment of expectations versus reality (Bergman et al., 2015).

Although there are obvious challenges for adult students, Bergman et al. (2015) explained that adult students are likely to seek similar levels of education as those with whom they associate, including close friends and family members. In other words, those who are immersed in a community of individuals who have attained higher education are more likely to strive for similar levels of education. This may suggest that, although the students in a holistic advising program would have similar levels of educational attainment, in-group effects could be achieved by having peer mentors who are further along academically, inspiring other students to pursue similar achievements.

Likewise, students in a holistic advising program can extend other influences on their peers, because of the engagement they have with other adult students. This connection allows students to address each other's risk factors, instead of trying to work through them in isolation. For example, if one student has an emergency with childcare that would have prevented him or her from attending class, a peer may step in to assist. If

a student is struggling in a certain class and has exhausted his or her tutoring hours or cannot get an appointment to see a tutor, another student may provide that kind of support. Those who work full-time might share strategies with other students who work full-time. The shared experiences among this population can serve to mitigate the influence of the indicators that Bergman et al. (2015) identified as contributing to a propensity to drop out before completing a credential.

Adult students are more likely to successfully complete their credentials if they believe they are able to succeed, surround themselves by others who have completed or are successfully persisting toward a credential, and have a clear goal that is realistic and dependent on credential completion (Bergman et al., 2015). Connecting a group of adult students who share a common educational experience can yield positive outcomes. It allows the participants to observe strategies that facilitate the success of their peers. They can collectively take on and overcome, with the support of their holistic advisors, obstacles that may have impeded their ability to succeed.

Using the holistic advising model to overcome institutional barriers. The campus climate has an influence on the experiences of adult students and can be directly responsible for making students feel welcome, shut out, nurtured, or ignored (Capps, 2012). Higher education administrators have effectively implemented various strategies to create opportunities for traditional-aged college students to engage with their college community. Student clubs and organizations, first-year experience programs, and learning communities have all sought to bond students to each other and to their college community.

These efforts are effective with traditional students, but little has been done to establish similar opportunities to serve the different needs of adult students. Considering the lack of time adult students spend on campus outside the classroom, making adult students feel positively and engaged within their college environment can be a challenge (Capps, 2012). In order to achieve this objective, the college must identify innovative ways for students to connect with faculty or staff and demonstrate why connecting with the college is worth the investment of adult students' time. Creating programs that can engage adult students and capitalize on the brief amount of time they are spending on campus is valuable in uniting this population of students.

Streamlining processes to maximize students' time is an area where for-profit institutions have demonstrated a high level of success. Because adult students do not immediately see value in spending time on campus (Arcand, 2015) or developing relationships with faculty or advisors (Capps, 2012), higher education administrators must change their strategies for serving the needs of this population. Instead, they need to implement programs for adult students that appeal to their maturity and independence. It has to be easier for them to connect, and they have to yield obvious benefits from the effort they put forth. For-profit institutions do this by creating environments where student services are easily accessible in the community rather than having a single campus.

For-profit colleges also oftentimes physically colocate a variety of services, where admissions, financial aid, and academic advising and staff are dedicated to guiding students throughout the process (Arcand, 2015). Milheim and Bichsel (2007) advocated

for this approach as well. They indicated these services should also include student success skills courses to facilitate better performance in a way that is accessible to low-income students.

Changing the approach used with adult students to foster engagement is not an easy undertaking. In her work comparing the experiences of low-income single-mothers in community colleges to those in for-profit institutions, Arcand (2015) provided three main suggestions for improving services for this population. First, Arcand expressed the importance of improving convenience by offering classes at different times or locations and helping parents access funds to allow them to select where their children could be cared for while they attend college. Second, Arcand's work indicated that proactive student services staff should reach out to this population to let them know about available resources that may assist students and their families. Third, Arcand suggested that community colleges should highlight their affordability and maintain their academic rigor while demonstrating the services available to facilitate student success.

These recommendations demonstrate another important feature of ALPHA's holistic advising program. It incorporates all of the best practices Arcand presented. This is achieved through a single-point of contact, so program participants do not need to have multiple contacts across the college. If the holistic advisor is not able to answer the student's question, it is the advisor's responsibility to find the answer from his or her supervisor or to provide the name and contact information of an individual who can provide the information the student needs.

Another means for providing better service to adult students in a holistic advising program is by making the most of students' time. For example, ALPHA's program events are typically multifunctional. They may engage partner organizations to address the needs of student–parents by offering a workshop on planning for their child's college enrollment that occurs immediately before a graduation celebration. Children of participants are invited to most events and programming for the children is provided by volunteers in the program's sister program, which is designed to serve children from preschool to 10th grade.

Providing important information during activities where students can make a connection to staff and other students allows them to immediately connect with various populations. Therefore, in the beginning of their first semester, adult students in ALPHA benefit from an orientation geared toward their needs, where they can receive critical information, meet other adult students, and work closely with staff members. This can lay a foundation for students to rely on each other and the community that is created, so that they can reach out if they encounter a problem, want to enroll in class with someone they know, or decide to create a study group.

The structure of the learning environment can have a profound effect on the success of adult learners. Because they are often juggling professional demands and family obligations with their academic loads, many adult students enroll part-time due to the time commitment demanded of full-time students. Unfortunately, as was indicated previously, although part-time enrollment allows more students to access higher

education due to the lower demands on the students' time, less than full-time enrollment is directly correlated to lower rates of student persistence (Bergman et al., 2015).

In order to overcome the inherent risks associated with part-time enrollment, holistic advising programs can serve students by highlighting alternative means by which to earn credit or identifying stackable credentials that can be completed while they pursue a longer-term goal. This provides a way for students to progress academically more quickly and yield credentials that can provide new professional opportunities or secure their existing job.

Adult students can also benefit from career-driven cohort training models that have embedded credentials earned as students progress (Helmer, 2013). Oftentimes, these training programs are run more efficiently than campus-based training. Rather than using the standard semester format used by many community colleges, training that is geared toward unemployed adults can run for the full day across multiple days in a week, significantly reducing the course length. Adult students seek these accelerated programming options (Arcand, 2015) so they can transition back to the workforce as quickly as possible (Helmer, 2013).

Programs that are run on alternative schedules and that produce interim credentials minimize the risk of nonacademic factors that can derail students from graduating (Kasworm, 2003; Pusser et al., 2007; Wilson, 2010). However, most community colleges have structures in place that unintentionally hinder adults. For example, most colleges still follow traditional semesters lasting up to 16 weeks. The fall semester begins before school-age children have returned to school, so parents have to

find childcare until their children return to school, presenting an additional barrier in their quest to pursue their own education.

Another example of factors that can be both an advantage and disadvantage is related to course scheduling. Classes in community colleges are frequently scheduled at varying times throughout the day (Wilson, 2010). Early in their programs, when they have numerous classes remaining to fulfill program requirements, this is an advantage, because they have numerous course options from which to choose, so finding a course at a time that works is not much of a challenge. However, as they approach graduation, their course options are much more limited, and there is no commitment from the institutions that the courses the students need will be offered at times that can work with their professional demands or when they can get childcare. While some courses may be available online, not all students are able to learn online.

Holistic advising programs incorporate some of the positive characteristics Wilson (2010) and Arcand (2015) identified in the for-profit higher education system. They are designed to support students from start to finish by addressing the barriers that have been demonstrated to prevent persistence. For example, many community colleges simply have too many choices available to students (Jenkins, 2015). Working closely with an advisor simplifies and clarifies the choices available to students. Another lesson from the for-profit sector is to base discussions on the students' identified goals and give them few points of contact for student services, rather than the typical quantity of offices for various services.

Jenkins (2015) also highlighted the importance of making procedures and processes clearer for students in community colleges in an analysis by the Community College Research Center to identify ways to facilitate student success. These recommendations included the development of programs to connect student goals to academic programs and incorporate feedback and progress monitoring, a model referred to as pathway programming. Early indications from institutions which have incorporated these components into their advising programs show promise (Jenkins, 2015).

Emphasis on the conclusion of students' programs of study is also important. Jenkins (2015) encouraged higher education administrators to look toward transfer planning and employment preparation strategies as well. These strategies may include programmatic relationships with universities, employers, inclusion of student internships, resume preparation, and interview skills development. This allows students to interface at the conclusion of their college programs with those with whom they hope to connect professionally and increases the probability that students are well-prepared for the demands that will be expected of them.

Students yield great benefits from attending community colleges including higher wages, health benefits, and overall well-being (Mayhew et al., 2016). Community college attendance also correlates to lower criminal activity and lower need of social service benefits (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). More comprehensive advising programs that work to address the diverse needs of students are effective in yielding higher rates of success in community college as compared to those that use a more simplified advising model (Jenkins, 2015).

Policy and Practice

There is no doubt that setting policies for a diverse population of students is wrought with challenges. Without fail, stipulations that are intended to facilitate student success result in unintended consequences. This is particularly true when student populations have different needs. In those circumstances, the development of practices that can target the needs of specific populations can prove to be ineffective strategies in supporting other populations.

Policies and practices that affect enrollment also play a significant role in student success (Bergman et al., 2015). Capps (2012) defined the difference between policy and practice:

> Policy and practice overlap in complex ways. Practice refers to what students can see, the everyday behaviors of faculty and staff. Students may assume that practice varies by personality…as individuals in any bureaucracy bring their own personal styles to their assigned roles. But policy's role is to ensure that good practices are not based solely on contingencies like personality or happenstance. Because students generally do not read policy documents and may interact with only a handful of faculty or staff, they may not see patterns of behavior or connect those patterns to an institutional agenda. However, policies lay the foundation for the overall direction of the institution and guide the individuals who represent it. (p. 42)

The distinction between policy and practice is important, because of the effect each has on students. Students attending community colleges tend to come from a variety

of backgrounds with varying levels of academic preparedness, English proficiency, and personal obligations like employment and family (Arcand, 2015; Choy, 2002; Hawley & Harris, 2005; Helmer, 2013; Willans & Seary, 2011). Furthermore, in observation of adult students who have been out of an academic environment for an extended period of time, when they decide to continue their education, the ranges of background and preparedness may be even more pronounced due to the personal and professional obligations on this population.

Most community colleges demand a placement test and, depending on the policies in place at the institution, the results of these exams can postpone access to college credit for multiple semesters due to the need for developmental coursework (Arcand, 2015; Helmer, 2013; Worth & Stephens, 2011). While these classes are critical for skill development and hence justify the policy, they are a significant hurdle for students who are trying to earn a credential quickly to reenter or advance in the workforce (Helmer, 2013). As such the practices that surround the enforcement of this policy can affect students greatly. While many colleges have practice tests, students who are new to higher education may not be aware of the tests. Others may exhibit severe test anxiety regarding the placement tests, because of the importance of its role in determining whether they can immediately begin their education (Helmer, 2013). Practices that address these challenges support the effective enforcement of a policy that may affect various populations differently.

Because adult students come to institutions of higher education with such diverse backgrounds, they may also come with knowledge that can be articulated into college

credit. Some colleges have policies to recognize college-level knowledge gained through college-level testing, recognition for employer-based education, and portfolio creation. However, this policy is not emphasized in practice and many students are unaware and do not take advantage of the opportunities for acquiring this credit. Others find the process cumbersome, expensive, or and are awarded minimal credit. Credit for prior learning has great potential for adult students because they seek to complete their education quickly, so they can advance professionally (Helmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2015). Identifying ways to simplify and advertise these opportunities would be highly beneficial.

Community colleges were established to serve the needs of their communities (Wilson et al., 2015). Many have done this quite effectively, but the result can lead to countless options for students (Jenkins, 2015). At the community college used in the current study, for example, there are 12 different academic programs connected with the field of business. There are even more programs when workforce development options are considered. Students interested in working with computers—a common request among community college students seeking higher wages—face over 20 different academic options (source: website of masked institution).

Policies related to financial aid, enrollment, and prior learning affect adult students at a disproportionate rate as compared to traditional college students due to the complex life situations they bring when pursuing higher education. Identifying ways to improve awareness and address the effects of these policies while explaining the various options available at the college has a profoundly positive influence on adult students. This approach also demands a more intimate familiarity with the student and his or her

circumstances to best advise the student. Holistic advising demands low ratios of students to advisors in order to achieve this rapport, but this resource investment is necessary to address the employment needs of our economy.

The argument for investing in low-income adult student success. Current data indicate that there will be an education shortfall in our economy by 2018 (Bergman et al., 2015; Carnevale et al., 2010; Quinterno, 2012). By that time, our economy is projected to have a shortfall of 3 million people who possess associate degree-level education (Carnevale et al., 2010). Over half of K-12 enrollment is made up from low-income families (Hall, 2015), so United States' society must establish a college-going culture within this population to encourage these families to meet this employment demand.

Graduating more low-income adult students can address this skills gap (Bergman et al., 2015). The work of Carnevale et al. (2010) indicated that more than 60 million adults in the prime working age range of 25-54 are working in jobs that require only high school education, even as those jobs are disappearing. By 2018, 63% of new hires are expected to demand postsecondary preparation. Those who fail to meet this requirement will face even fewer access points to the middle-class—a devastating prospect for many low-income families.

Adult student enrollment is affected much more drastically by changes in the labor market than is the enrollment of traditional college students. Adult students tend to return to higher education during periods of economic downturn to rebound after job loss or make themselves more valuable to their existing organizations (Pusser et al., 2007). This was visible after the 2008 economic crisis that would become known as the Great

Recession, when many employees saw their jobs cut, never to be rehired, and they sought education to find opportunities with more job security (Carnevale et al., 2010; Helmer, 2013). From fall 2007 to fall 2010, enrollment in community colleges increased by 20% (Phillippe & Mullin, 2011), although it has since declined as the effects of the recession have decreased.

However, due to those same budget shortfalls that lead to mass layoffs, policymakers tend to direct fewer fiscal resources to higher education during those economic downturns (Jenkins, 2015; Pusser et al., 2007). This is a universal principle of economics: When companies have fewer customers, they lay off staff, which leads to those individuals contributing less tax revenue to the government and into the economy. Not only is their tax revenue lost, but they may also become a consumer of government resources they did not previously access, in order to support their families during their financial hardship. The government, working with less money from tax revenue, in turn makes cuts to government-sponsored programs including support of higher education. In fact, during the Great Recession, states with the largest budget shortfalls demonstrated a clear correlation to those with the biggest cuts in higher education funding (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014).

The cuts in higher education funding leads to fewer accessible sources of funding for adult students, which in turn makes it more difficult for such students to pursue their education. This is particularly problematic when there are significant quantities of students seeking the support of the government, which can be a major financial drain on an already strained system (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014). However, higher education can

reverse the downward trajectory of this principle. Over their lifetimes, college graduates

contribute more than $300,000 more in federal taxes than those without a degree

(Bergman et al., 2015). They are also significantly less likely to lose their jobs in the

most recent economic downturn (Carnevale et al., 2010).

    The Pell problem. One policy that appeared promising for adult students, but was

short-lived due to budget constraints, was the increase in funding to provide what became

known as year-round Pell Grants. Historically, Pell Grants have been available for two

full-time semesters of enrollment. This is another circumstance in which policies were

designed with traditional college enrollment in mind (Delisle & Miller, 2015).

    In the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress allowed

students to access a second Pell Grant when they exhausted the first during a school year.

This provided Pell funding for students who, for example, had attended full-time during

the fall and spring semesters and would attend during the summer if Pell funding was

available (Delisle & Miller, 2015; Federal Register, 2012). This was quite advantageous

for Pell-eligible adult students who may be enrolled full-time during a break in

employment, because it allowed them to study year around. The higher levels of

enrollment would allow academic programs to be completed more quickly, so the

students could return to the workforce.

    This opportunity existed for just a short time, however. This funding was rolled

into an expansion of Pell eligibility, timed at the start of The Great Recession (Goldrick-

Rab et al., 2016). It was authorized to take effect after July 1, 2009, which meant that

students at most schools would not have the opportunity to access it until they exhausted

funding during the summer semester of 2010 (Delisle & Miller, 2015). This and the other changes related to Pell eligibility during the Great Recession resulted in an unexpected increase of funding allocated to Pell of $10 billion per year (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). By February 2011, elimination of the year-round Pell was proposed. The reason for the termination of this program was the expense associated with year-round Pell grants and that there had not been any indication that they led students to accelerate their program completion (Delisle & Miller, 2015).

Although the intent of the reversal of the year-round Pell policy was to reduce waste in, and therefore the expense of, the Pell Grant program, the effect of its elimination had drastic consequences to students who used Pell Grants responsibly. The elimination of access to these funds forced full-time adult students to break their enrollment after two semesters due to lack of funds. For an adult student who left work to study full-time, this or any lapse in enrollment results in wasted precious time (Pusser et al., 2007).

Many within the higher education community suggested such a short period was not enough time to make an informed judgment about whether students would complete at a faster rate and what the overall expense would be (Delisle & Miller, 2015). This example describes how federal policy has a very clear connection to the outcomes of students in community colleges. Arguments on both sides of the issue are strong. However, if one looks at the issue from the vantage point of allowing this population to access a benefit that they are already entitled to receive at a more consistent rate, it is

clear that allowing low-income students to access Pell Grants year-round would allow

them to graduate more quickly and enter or reenter the workforce.

Reassessing practice. Student success goes beyond providing access to college

and requires multiple safety nets to maximize opportunities to succeed. In an article

summarizing the literature regarding current best practices for supporting student

veterans, a comparable population to low-income adult students, Vaccaro (2015)

identified multiple services that have been successful for student veterans, including

transition services into the college, assistance processing benefits, credit for prior

learning, waivers for college health plans, academic advising, and counseling services.

With the exception of waivers for college health plans, which are not typically mandated

in community colleges, all of these best practices can be applied to the success of all

adult student populations.

The higher education community must be willing to move beyond access to create

an environment that fosters success. This demands an investment of resources for the

duration of students' studies to facilitate graduation of more individuals (Belfield &

Bailey, 2011). Robust holistic advising programs to serve students who have a statistical

propensity for being unsuccessful in college are the missing element in the existing

movement from open access to higher rates of graduation (Helmer, 2013).

Serving students intensively who have indications of risk from the point of

application through graduation with the intent of improving the likelihood of success

(Thomas & Minton, 2004) is a key element to fostering opportunities for students to build

their human capital. This is critical because the implications for society are profound.

College-educated citizens exhibit higher levels of civic engagement in terms of volunteering and voting (Mayhew et al., 2016; Quinterno, 2012). Additionally, not only would society benefit from having a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce, it would have economic outcomes in terms of increased tax revenue.

Outcomes such as earning potential and influence on subsequent generations are far greater when students complete their credential as compared to simply starting college (Belfield & Bailey, 2011; Jenkins, 2015). Mayhew et al. (2016) indicated the importance of shifting focus from solely access to graduation. When compared to those who possess a high school diploma, bachelor's degree holders earn 37-39% more annually and associate's degree holders earn 17-27% more annually. The effect of earning an associate's degree was the same whether the student was a returning adult or had studied immediately after high school. Studying in college for one year without earning a credential yielded a 5% increase in annual earnings as compared to those with a high school diploma. Clearly, the economic advantage is in completion of a credential.

Pell Grants and other forms of financial aid have provided a way for low-income adult students to enter higher education. Although policies to support these efforts are far from perfect, the aid holds great value to the students who use it. However, as was mentioned in the previous section, there are very intentional purposes behind federal efforts to assist low-income students to pursue higher education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). The purpose of these efforts goes far beyond altruistic desires to give back to underserved populations; there is an opportunity cost for improving individuals' economic situations through skills development. This can be seen from the first

implementation of government-supported financial aid programs and points toward the anticipated returns on investment in students from disadvantaged populations (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009).

As discussed above, the return on investment of tax dollars via aid programs is influenced by whether or not the students successfully complete their higher education. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2009) pointed out the importance of continued investment in education to reach full potential when they noted: "there is empirical evidence to indicate that the returns to early investments in human capital depend on the extent of later investments" (p. 19). Although this comment was in discussion about college preparation for grade school children, I believe the same statement can be applied to work with college students. Higher education has an obligation to create environments in which their students can succeed and there is evidence that there is significant work to be done. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) calculated that 11% of Pell Grant recipients attending universities did not enroll for a second year and over 80% did not earn a bachelor's degree within four years. The rate of degree attainment is 20% higher if calculated after six years.

The data above are not intended to suggest that government funding should blindly increase to accommodate all students who seek higher education. However, Jenkins's (2015) research did indicate that community college education is worth the investment. Rather than making sweeping cuts to state support of community college education, funding should be correlated to efficacy. This efficacy is demonstrated in ALPHA by careful tracking of data to include demographical information, rate of

attendance, student progress, credential attainment, and employment outcomes. The data can be used to demonstrate that students enter programs of study, successfully complete credentials, and enter the workforce in careers related to their studies. Instead, funding cuts are forcing community colleges to eliminate strategies that can facilitate success among populations that most need higher education (Jenkins, 2015).

Conclusion

With the vast number of low-income adult students entering higher education institutions and exiting prior to completion (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007), the field of higher education must address the shortcomings that exist in service to this population. Academic advising has evolved and changed in response to the needs of students, and holistic advising provides an approach to better serve students with a statistical likelihood for dropping out of college. The challenge, it seems, is the cost that is associated with implementing these robust programs. Thus, this study serves to address some of the areas identified for future research by Milheim and Bichsel (2007). This work provides data on how participation in this comprehensive program contributes to the persistence and success of low-income community college students. Similarly, the role of the advisor is important in holistic advising, so this study addresses the role that students believe their holistic advisor plays in their persistence and success.

The literature indicated that there are significant differences between this population and traditional-aged college students (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007), and that the existing structure of higher education serves traditional students more effectively than it serves adult students. However, little evidence is available about how low-income adult

students view the differences between themselves and their traditional-aged peers. This perspective may reveal opportunities for improving the experience of adult students in higher education.

Although this review has explained some of the ways in which existing policies and procedures influence success among adult students, there is no literature available on adult student perspectives related to the effect policy or practices play on their student experience. This study serves to fill a gap in the literature by answering these important questions:

1. From the students' perspectives, how do elements of holistic advising (such as single-source academic advising, financial aid advising, and public benefits access) affect low-income community college students?

2. From the students' perspectives, which community college policies or procedures have the most significant influence on their student experience?

The data used to answer these questions will provide insight into areas that can level the playing field for adult students.

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Chapter Three

  This chapter explains the approach I used in conducting this research. I open by providing an overview of how the ALPHA program functions. I then describe the design of the research and why I chose case study as my methodological approach. Then, I delve into the intricacies of this study, including the participants, data collection methods, and the process by which I analyzed the data. I conclude the chapter by discussing the limitations of this study and describe my positionality and reflexivity to explain my credibility as a researcher.

Holistic Advising in Practice

  In order to provide readers with a better understanding of how the ALPHA program functions differently from most advising programs, I will explain the student admission, advising, and enrollment processes for students who participated in ALPHA. Students were first introduced to ALPHA when they attended a workshop in which they were invited to complete the college application and FAFSA. Students were screened to determine if they might also benefit from completing the statewide application for social service benefits. Students were advised on how to follow up on each of these processes, but if documentation was needed to complete either the college application or the financial aid paperwork, students' assigned access advisor followed up with them directly to work together to complete the necessary documentation.

Prior to enrollment, students were directed to watch Web-based presentations discussing placement tests and maintaining financial aid eligibility. They were also required to complete their placement tests prior to enrollment. After students completed all necessary components of the access process, they were invited to attend a new student orientation specifically for ALPHA participants. There, they were provided important information including parking regulations, the importance of reviewing syllabi for their courses, and other student success information. This was also the point at which students transitioned from their access advisor and were assigned a success advisor, who served as their point of contact until they completed their credential. Students were expected to email their success advisor to schedule a face-to-face meeting within a week after orientation.

This first meeting between the success advisor and student was one-on-one and was important for building rapport. The advisor spent about 90 minutes learning about potential obstacles to success and developing strategies for credential completion. By the conclusion of the meeting, the student should have validated his or her career goal and associated program of study, registered for classes, and had a basic level of understanding about financial aid policy, as well as a clear understanding of the heavy emphasis placed on communication between ALPHA program participants and their advisors.

Prior to the start of the semester, the advisors would review students' records to confirm enrollment and reach out to students to remind them about critical dates and elicit any other questions the student may have before classes begin. Prior to the drop date of classes another message was sent to students to ensure they felt comfortable with

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their course requirements and life balance. During the first semester, students were also required to view another Web-based presentation on student success skills and strategies.

Near the middle of the semester, program participants were asked to have their faculty members complete a midsemester progress report to serve as an early alert about potential problems they may have encountered. Students who did not turn in this documentation were not permitted to register for the subsequent semester until final grades were posted. This tool served to guide the conversation between students and their advisors in the discussion about scheduling for the next semester regarding course load and rigor.

Students in ALPHA were expected to communicate regularly with their success advisors about their college experience and the integration of academic demands with their existing personal and professional obligations. Advisors explained to their students that whether they were struggling with an academic issue, their utilities were likely to be turned off, or they were experiencing a health crisis or job loss, the advisor wanted to be informed. These factors were deemed to have the potential of a catastrophic effect on their success in college similarly as the need for tutoring or another academic challenge.

As in a developmental advising model, in a holistic advising model as students progress through their studies, more of the responsibility for enrollment decision making is shifted to them, and communication from the advisor to the student is tapered to facilitate greater independence from the advisor. This fading support model was important to ALPHA and its students. Not only did it provide an opportunity for the student to build confidence in a supported way, but it also allowed the program to serve

more students, because those students who were further along in their programs of study needed less time and resources from their advisors.

Students who were further along in their programs were also encouraged to provide support to their peers through an ambassador program, in which participants spoke to prospective program participants during recruitment events, attended programmatic events, and offered encouragement to peers. Although program participants were often too busy to engage in this way, those who did gained skills that could be applied in a professional environment as well as in their civic communities.

As students neared completion of their credentials, advisors observed an increase in the support students needed as they shifted their support from academic persistence to transitional support. Some students who had completed their credentials sought guidance on transfer options to a university while others needed information about identifying internship or career opportunities. ALPHA incorporated the services of a career and internship counselor who assisted with resume development, preparation for interviews, and connection to the local Workforce Development Board.

ALPHA was not intended to be completely autonomous in serving its students. Students were referred to on-campus resources that perform functions that could not be managed by their ALPHA advisor. For example, if students needed writing support or access to specialized services like veteran benefits or disability services, they were referred to the appropriate individual on campus. One valuable approach, however, was that ALPHA advisors sought to connect students to specific people instead of an office or department.

ALPHA staff also worked closely with community organizations to refer students in need to resources that could make their lives more comfortable while they pursued their studies. Some of these partners included social service agencies and nonprofit organizations that could connect students to childcare, resources to stabilize their financial situations, and counseling for those that needed it. Cross-referral was foundational to ALPHA's success. ALPHA served to anticipate needs and collaborate with students and partners to address obstacles that could affect student persistence and success.

Research Design

When determining which methodological approach made the most sense to gather the information sought by this research, careful consideration was made to determine how I could best yield the data sought. In order to do this, I had to carefully consider my research questions:

1. From the students' perspectives, how do elements of holistic advising (such as single-source academic advising, financial aid advising, and public benefits access) affect low-income community college students?

2. From the students' perspectives, which community college policies or procedures have the most significant influence on their student experience?

In the end, I determined that using qualitative case study would be the most effective method for understanding the student experience. I reflected on an experience detailed by Patton (2015) regarding the difference between the information yielded from quantitative and qualitative data. He explained how the birth of his granddaughter was

detailed in the record books of the hospital quantitatively, reporting on a healthy child, but it missed the effect that her birth had on those around her. Similarly, the quantitative data associated with ALPHA demonstrated it was successful in retaining adult students. However, the experiences of the students involved in this program held the value in demonstrating the importance addressing nonacademic needs of low-income adult students.

The research questions focus on student perspectives about how the holistic advising program in which they participate has affected their student experience. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for eliciting the in-depth observations and descriptions of each student's unique experience (Stake, 1995). Patton (2015) provided a summary of the ways in which qualitative research contributes to knowledge generation that convinced me that qualitative research was the best approach to yield the information I sought (see Table 1).

Table 1

The Contributions of Qualitative Inquiry: Seven Examples

Qualitative Contribution	Inquiry Focus
1. Illuminating Meanings	Qualitative inquiry studies, documents, analyzes, and interprets how human beings construct and attach meanings to their experiences. Birth, death, learning—indeed, any and all human experiences—are given meaning by those involved. Interviews and observations reveal those meanings and their implications.
2. Studying how things work	Program evaluations study what participants in programs experience, the outcomes of those experiences, and how program experiences lead to program outcomes. More generally, qualitative inquiry can illuminate how any human phenomenon unfolds as it does: how churches, social groups, political campaigns, community events, and social media work—and the effects on those who participate.
3. Capturing stories to understand people's perspectives and experiences	An in-depth case study tells the story of a person, group, organization, or community. There's a starting point (baseline); events unfold; some point of closure is reached. The story, well-documented and well told, opens a window into the world of the case(s) studied.
4. Elucidating how systems function and their consequences on people's lives	Systems involve complex interdependent dimensions that interact in ways that affect the people in those systems. Family systems, cultural systems, organizational systems, political systems, economic systems, community systems: qualitative inquiry systematically gathers perspectives on what happens within systems, and how what happens has implications for those involved. The results are systems stories and insights.
5. Understanding context: how and why it matters	Context refers to what's going on around the people, groups, organizations, communities, or systems of interest. If someone wants to understand what brings you to this book, the context within which you are reading (school, job, project, professional development, team, workshop) will be critical to illuminate and understand. People's lives and events unfold within larger, enveloping contexts. For qualitative inquiry and analysis, contextual sensitivity is central.
6. Identifying unanticipated consequences	Leaders, planners, social innovators, managers, politicians, change agents, community organizers, evaluators—the list goes on and on—strive to attain their intended goals. The modern world is highly goal oriented. But things seldom go as planned. Much of what was intended never occurs, and things that are never intended, and never even imagined, do occur. The open-ended fieldwork of qualitative inquiry documents both intended and unintended consequences of change processes.
7. Making case comparisons to discover important patterns and themes across cases	Comparisons involve analyzing both similarities and differences. We learn and deepen our understanding of phenomena of all kinds by drawing contrasts and making comparisons. Case studies provide rich data for teasing out what cases have in common and what sets them apart: successes versus failures, those who are resilient and those who are not, those who have long marriages and those who have multiple divorces, those who engage in qualitative methods and those who insist that only numbers count. Comparisons illuminate the enormous diversity of humanity even as we seek and find patterns across that diversity.

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.) by M. Q. Patton (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), p. 13.

Rationale for Case Study as Method

Identifying where the sought information is available. It was only after World War II that people became accustomed to the concept that multiple voices make up public opinion. Interviews then became increasingly important as a means to acquire information. Hearing from many individuals about their personal experiences is valuable (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

A wealth of information that influences practice can be gained by evaluating select experiences. Flyvbjerg (2006) explained that understanding human behavior cannot be accomplished by simply looking at broad theory en masse. Instead, higher-level thinking conducted by someone with extensive experience with the issue is necessary. Continued exposure to the researched participants as well as their feedback further authenticates what is gained in the research process. Therefore, when an expert is clear about the information he or she wants to uncover and knows who possesses that information, it is critical to connect with those specific individuals, rather than pursuing a random sample of the population.

Although historical practices might have suggested going to the staff of a successful program to inform the researcher how its features lead to success among low-income adult community college students (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), my experience with ALPHA led me to believe that the information I sought was possessed by the student-participants. As Flyvbjerg suggested, I have the familiarity with the issue to be confident that the information should be derived from the students themselves, rather

than relying on administrators to serve as informants. Establishing these boundaries for the case is important for narrowing the focus of inquiry (Patton, 2015).

This demand on the researcher to receive information from those who are best able to express data relevant to the study strikes tension with another critical element of case study research. Case study is often criticized as a method that is used to prove the researcher's viewpoint rather than interpreting reality described through the research process (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Thus, interview questions must be crafted and asked in such a way that they yield insight into the subjects' perspectives while ensuring that the participants are not led to a preconceived answer that supports the researcher's early hypotheses.

Individual cases within a larger case study. Patton (2015) described how case study is rarely just one case of an exemplary circumstance. Instead, it often consists of multiple case studies "nested and layered" (p. 383) within the case. For example, since the focus of this study was on what was happening for students within this program, each participant is a case nested within the larger case of the ALPHA program. This observation helped to narrow the unit of analysis. I further narrowed the boundaries of my study to seek students who used either social or community benefits and/or have children.

This distinction of individual cases within a larger case is important, because the result of this work has various tendrils of data that cross and overlap. I did not anticipate, nor receive, uniformity in participants' experiences. Rather, I wanted to focus attention

on students who have particularly challenging circumstances that could affect their success in college, yet had continued to persist or had already completed a credential.

This research has the potential to change the approach used for serving adult students through a better understanding of how students are affected by holistic advising that addresses needs outside the classroom. Stake (1995) cautioned, "The case will not be seen the same by everyone" (p. 64). Students have varying needs and participants emphasized different areas that contributed to their college experience. I sought to recognize those varying perspectives in order to aggregate them to identify areas—or themes—that can be most effectively addressed by student services practitioners.

Individual cases to support broad understanding. A benefit of using case study as a method for this work is its intent to reveal effect within the extremes (Flyvbjerg, 2006). ALPHA offered comprehensive support services that went beyond what many community colleges would deem feasible due to significant grant funding. One of the purposes of this study was to provide a spotlight to showcase the program's features that had a significant effect on students' experiences. This is valuable for highlighting possibilities for improving service to students within existing structures in higher education.

Flyvbjerg described the influence that individual case studies can have in creating broad understanding by noting Galileo's ability to refute Aristotle's longstanding law of gravity. By demonstrating his own law with a single experiment, Galileo was able to change the existing understanding of gravity (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 225-226). In other

words, effectively highlighting extreme cases allowed broader conclusions or experiments to be conducted to develop new theory and practice.

Clearly, all practices within ALPHA's structure were not recognized as having a beneficial effect on the student experience from the student perspective. However, by highlighting those practices that have the most significant influence on the experiences of this population, practitioners can identify ways to incorporate improved procedures for supporting adult students in their institutions. This benefits the broader field of higher education by improving service to a large demographic of students.

Relevance beyond the higher education community. Conducting case study research brings forth challenging questions of relevance to the field (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Patton, 2015). When researchers focus on the minutiae of an issue, they may question the significance to the larger discipline. Flyvbjerg advocated for writing the resulting report in such a way that it can apply across disciplines, to address the multidimensional nature of the narrative provided by participants during the interview. This approach allows the work to benefit many different audiences.

In the current study, the success of students who participate in ALPHA is not only relevant to the population of higher education administrators interested in better serving low-income adult community college students; ALPHA connected with multiple nonprofit organizations, and many participants indicated use of social service benefits. Additionally, this approach to advising could apply to other special populations in higher education. The responses to the interview questions also speak to the psychology of low-

income adults and the sociology of being a part of a larger community seeking similar outcomes. This cross-discipline approach to this work can affect its relevance across multiple fields.

Participants

  Selection. Patton described a method often used in selection for qualitative research: "studying a relatively small number of special cases that are successful at something and therefore a good source of lessons learned" (2015, p. 16). The field shares this philosophy. Reybold, Lammert, and Stribling (2013) noted the importance of purposeful sampling: "the logic of selection is grounded in the value of information-rich cases and emergent, in-depth understanding not available through random sampling" (p. 700). Stake (1995), too, indicated that the case study researcher should pursue the "best" sources of data (p. 56). Again, this is a concept that distinguishes strong qualitative research over other types of research.

  The objective in selection is to identify those participants who can best provide relevant data to the study, so selection may continue to evolve throughout a study. The quality of the researcher's data is heavily affected by the decisions that are made in the participant selection process (Jones et al., 2014). This focus on specific cases that deliver the most insightful data provides the greatest opportunity for contribution to the field.

  Description of the student experience from the student's perspective is one of the most valuable insights the field can consider when developing processes to improve student experience. Reybold et al. (2013) described how purposeful sampling goes beyond uncovering meaning, and actually creates it. By identifying the specific

individuals who are most directly affected by the decisions made by various authorities, researchers can create meaning about those observations.

It is natural for many practitioners to approach advising with existing theories or by continuing to do their work within the comfortable confines of existing practice. However, to better understand what is going on with students both inside and outside the classroom and how those experiences are interrelated, it is critical to immerse oneself in real experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Students' experiences should inform practice to better address their needs in institutions of higher education.

In this research, the group that was studied included select adult students participating in a specific student services program at a large community college in the Mid-Atlantic region. I first sought approval from George Mason's Office of Research Integrity and Assurance. I then did the same at the institution where the study would take place (masked to protect confidentiality). The project was categorized as exempt from review (Appendix A).

The majority of students in the identified population were low-income adults seeking higher education to realize a career change. Targeted students included those who indicated they had children and/or had used social service or community benefit programs. Although I did not limit my selection strategy to emphasize specific subpopulations, ALPHA serves many students with a poor academic history, General Educational Development (GED) Test completers, students with higher education from foreign countries, and those who have military or professional experience that has been articulated toward their curricular program at the community college to expedite

credential completion. The interview pool included representation from many of these populations.

In order to identify a target population within the participants of this program, all currently participating or recently graduated participants received an email asking them to participate. Out of more than 600 students, I received a total of 19 responses expressing an interest in participation. To those respondents, I sent a survey to identify those who used community or social service benefits, have children, and had been in the program long enough to understand how it had influenced their student experience. Those who met all of the criteria were ideal participants.

All program participants received holistic advising, but Stake (1995) described the importance of finding those who provide the most clarity and understanding of the case, rather than simply pursuing someone who represents a typical case. I felt that focusing on those participants with specific barriers would provide depth and insight to this research. Their experiences pointed toward the extreme cases Flyvbjerg (2006) suggested would provide broader conclusions. The recruitment email and survey are included as Appendix B and Appendix C.

I received 16 surveys and none of the respondents met all of the criteria that would have deemed them ideal participants. However, I was able to identify 7 candidates who met at least one of the criteria and chose to interview each of them. All were female. During one of the interviews, one of the candidates indicated her husband was also a student in ALPHA. She encouraged him to participate in the study as well, which provided a more diversified perspective by including a male participant as well as

impressions from a married couple attempting to pursue higher education at the same time.

      Participant overview. In order to familiarize the reader with participants, Table 2 provides a brief description of each of the interviewees. This is intended to present an initial impression of who was interviewed. Readers will learn more about each of the participants in Chapter 4 when a more robust profile of each participant will be introduced using segments from their interviews to explain the themes that resulted from this research.

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

	Antoinette	Ella	Jennifer	Kevin	Oma	Ommohamed	Sasha	Syd
First attempt at college	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
Credits reported by participant toward credential	59	28	61	29	54	21	55	Due to graduate in semester of interview
GPA	3.14	3.79	3.88	4.00	3.00	3.86	2.79	2.61
Ultimate goal at Community College	AAS Business	AS Business	AAS Early Childhood	AAS Early Childhood	AS Business	AAS Early Childhood	AA Liberal Arts	Certificate Clinical Coding
Work status	Full-time	Part-time	Part-time	Part-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	No
Referenced child rearing/ care issues	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Referenced struggle to secure benefits to allow for school	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Age	55	39	45	25	24	43	29	41
Self-Identified Race	Black	White	Caucasian	Hispanic	Hispanic	Black	Black	Black and White

Note. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Once I had identified the participants for this study, I invited each of them to meet for an interview. I began by providing the informed consent form and discussing its purpose. I then invited each participant to select their own pseudonym which was used to protect their identity throughout this project. Each of the interviews lasted for about one hour. While I anticipated needing just one interview, my plan allowed for a subsequent interview if necessary.

As a qualitative study, I felt the most important element of data collection in this study would be the information gained from interviewing participants. Interviews are the most-used method for gaining information in social science research. They provide great depth and insight into the lives of the participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Not surprisingly, they often include extensive narrative (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to articulate the nuances of the unique experiences of the participants.

The ability to describe one's story is a great advantage in case study research. Because they invite subjectivity and individual experience (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), interviews can provide insight into the lived experiences of each participant to understand what influences have the greatest effect on the student's experience. As Riessman (2003) noted, these stories "convey the details…of their experiences" and can foster a "community of action" (p. 332) to encourage practices that allow more students to succeed in higher education.

The content and structure of interviews in case studies play an important role in the outcome of the research. Not only is the information that is received directed by what is asked; but what is asked reflects the researcher's positionality. Although the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee are intimately entangled during the actual interview process, answers provided in the interviews often become stand-alone data representing the individual interviewed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), so the means by which the responses are elicited should be afforded careful attention. In other words, in preparation for the interview, the researcher should determine that the selected questions are effective in revealing the sought information. I managed to do this by

conducting a pilot study that allowed me to test my questions and make necessary modifications (Stake, 1995). My interview questions are included in Appendix D.

I sought to conduct the interviews in locations that were convenient to the participants. Locations varied from coffee shops, to conference rooms in their places of employment, to a private room at a public library, to offices in college facilities. In each situation, I worked with the participant to ensure we had enough time and were free of distractions (Poland, 2003).

Each interview was recorded. Later, they were transcribed and then listened to again to ensure accuracy of content. Interpretation of verbal data is wrought with challenges including the quality of recording, interpreting where and which punctuation should be used, confusing words that sound alike, and confusing words due to accents or background noise (Poland, 2003). With this in mind, I emphasized quiet locations and used a high-quality recording device placed closely to the interviewee, as Poland suggests. Additionally, I was cognizant of maintaining consistency in the transcription of laughter, pauses, and other nonverbal indicators in the transcripts. I also verbally ended each interview prior to turning off the recording device. When I had completed my transcription, I then sent the transcript to the participant to ask the participant to verify the content. Not all participants chose to respond to that request and those who did simply indicated they approved of the transcription.

Aside from the interviews, another component of this study included access to review students' Academic Advising Reports. These reports contained information including GPA, course enrollment history, student identification number, program(s) of

study, placement test results, and remaining requirements. Documents such as these can serve as a valuable source of data in qualitative research (Stake, 1995). I used this information to verify information provided by the students regarding previous enrollment history, how their performance changed after joining ALPHA, and information about how they were progressing toward their credential completion.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is ongoing from the first steps in the research process. It is part of the process of making sense out of what is observed. Case study demands two methods for data analysis: direct interpretation from a single source and those derived from multiple sources that speak to collective meaning (Stake, 1995).

From my first review of the transcripts, I identified categories that seemed to appear across multiple interviews. This approach was used because this case study is intended to be an instrumental case study. It provides insight and understanding about the role holistic advising plays on students in ALPHA. This research is not intended to provide in-depth understanding of ALPHA, but serves the purpose of understanding the relationship between participation in ALPHA and the success of its student–participants (Stake, 1995).

My approach to data analysis in this research began by reading through each transcript and precoding by making short notes to the side about how I might categorize what was said. I then used various colors of ink to associate key statements with different research questions. During this process, I also highlighted significant phrases that seemed to standout as reflective of critical information. I looked for patterns across participants

(Stake, 1995). I used these preliminary codes to identify categories, or descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2013), that describe the students' experiences. Saldaña explained that codes evolve through the analysis process.

I read each of the transcripts multiple times, creating codes from each transcript, then comparing the data to the data from other interview transcripts. I created a chart to help me make sense of the data by indicating how frequently each code was present in the data. These results led me to identify the themes that were presented in the data.

In addition to thorough analysis of the interviews and transcripts, I analyzed participants' Academic Advising Reports. I found this valuable in comparing participants' enrollment and verifying unclear information. For example, I used this information to confirm GPAs and progress toward completion of participants' educational goals. It also proved helpful in confirming information about their utilization of policies intended to benefit adult students such as academic renewal or prior learning assessment.

Stake (1995) explained that most qualitative research yields far more data than can be analyzed and that researchers have an obligation to focus on the best data with emphasis on the key issues. Thus, I narrowed the list of themes by using my research questions to direct my efforts. What I soon discovered was that my four original research questions contained redundancies that became apparent when the same data points were applied across multiple research questions. Similarly, if I tried to identify the themes based directly on the original questions, the data I had yielded were most prominent in the areas of most significance to the field of higher education. Thus, I took the advice of

Stake (1995), and edited my research questions once I had more clarity about how to phrase what I had sought all along and what I had successfully yielded from the data. Namely, the data were used to identify key themes to explain how elements of holistic advising affect low-income adult community college students, and which policies and practices they believe influenced their persistence in college.

Limitations

In their book on the use of qualitative research in the field of higher education, Jones et al. (2014) cautioned that case study should be presented in such a way that it clearly defines the limitations of the study as well as how it fits within the larger context of the field of higher education. Something significant should be learned from the case. Stake (1995) supported this as well, as he guided researchers in selecting their cases: "The first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn…which cases are likely to lead us to understandings, to assertions, perhaps even to modifying generalizations?" (p. 4). The focus, then, is on "inquiry for promoting understanding" (p. 37).

More specifically, researchers must describe the limited context within which a phenomenon occurs. Viewing the case within historical, cultural, and physical context provides more clarity as to how a circumstance can be best understood (Stake, 2006). Most importantly, this research is not intended to generalize across all populations, but rather to provide insight into how this approach is working and what its effect is on the students who agree to participate in this study.

That said, limitations exist when conducting case study. This research consists of data from eight adult students. With these participants, I was able to go more deeply into

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understanding their experience, but the experiences of this population may not reflect what other adult students experience. Another limitation was that all of the participants attended the same community college and lived in the same general area. All were enrolled in credit programming seeking to earn various credentials including certificates, associate degrees, and some intended to continue on for baccalaureate degrees. ALPHA also serves students in noncredit programming, although none of those students participated in this study. These factors may have also influenced the research outcomes.

Researcher Bias and Credibility

For qualitative research to be deemed credible, it is important to ensure that the reader has an opportunity to be familiar with the researcher (Stake, 1995). For it to be deemed valuable, it is important to understand why the information matters to the profession. Reybold et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of recognizing the researcher's perspective of the issue and what could be gained by pursuing the research (p. 703). At the end of the process, the conclusions from the research are "constructed" through the choices and interpretations made by the researcher throughout the research cycle (p. 713).

Flyvbjerg (2006) provided an impressive argument about research as a vehicle for learning. The placement of the researcher within the research environment becomes an effective means for understanding what is going on. Certainly, this could be viewed as a level of subjectivity, but it is a positive outcome of qualitative research. Positionality allows the data to be presented through the lens of the researcher's perspective within the research environment.

This was an important factor for me because my professional role is that of an administrator for ALPHA. Due to my position, I have a high level of familiarity with the programmatic features and college processes that students experience. This awareness would not have been possible with a researcher from outside of the program.

In addition to my professional interests in this area, I have spent no small amount of time researching adult students throughout my studies. Academically, I have earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, a Master of Education in Student Affairs, and a graduate certificate in College Counseling. In addition, I am currently a doctoral candidate working on my Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a Higher Education specialization.

As a professional, I was drawn to this research because of my intimate familiarity with adult students and my appreciation for an advising approach I have not observed in many other places. At its foundation was the key emphasis of service to students to facilitate high levels of success at the college. I have witnessed the program support numerous students who would not have been successful without it.

My knowledge is not limited to a singular environment of adult students; I have extensive experience working with adults pursuing higher education. I have worked exclusively with adult students since 2000, serving several populations within this group including military-affiliated students, low-income students, non-native English speakers, students with foreign education, and GED completers. I began working as an advisor for ALPHA when it was still a pilot program, and later moved into a management role.

During the period that this study was conducted, I was on a fellowship from the college, so I had no day-to-day interaction with ALPHA's students or staff.

In his support of case study as method, Flyvbjerg (2006) explained that expertise is developed through repeated exposure to "several thousand concrete cases" (p. 222). In my work with adults, I have observed many cases of adult students attempting to pursue higher education. Some are successful, and some fail. My work over the past 17 years has prepared me to say that, as an expert in adult higher education, this student services program had a profound effect on the success of the students it served. This dissertation served to highlight how holistic advising affected students and their success. This information can inform practice by creating environments and implementing procedures that are more favorable to good outcomes for low-income adult community college students.

One concern about this work is that the same knowledge that drew my attention to the work done by this program and led me to want to pursue this research also served as a potential obstacle with this work. I am an administrator for ALPHA. As Holstein and Gubrium (2003) discussed, it is expected that interviewers will remain neutral and "keep their 'selves' out of the interview process" (p. 13). I sought to invite participant perspectives without influencing their responses.

While recognizing my positionality, regardless of the level of expertise of researchers or their comfort level with the issue being studied, findings must not be simply shaped into the result the researchers sought from the beginning of the research process (Patton, 2015). Findings should evolve from the data instead of forcing the data

to conform to a preconceived theory. This can be achieved by incorporating challenges to the theory as it evolves to test the developing hypothesis with later participants.

In addition to challenging the outcomes, one could rearrange the data to seek alternative conclusions. By working through these "rival organizing schemes" (Patton, 2015, p. 553) one is able to explore potential alternative justifications to find the right fit for what the data reveal. This constant comparative analysis helped to shape the resulting outcomes based on the data as they emerged (Patton).

The tension between my role as a researcher and my professional role as an administrator weighed heavily as I planned this study. I was determined to prevent my positionality from becoming a bias that would lead participants to report information they believed I wanted to hear, rather than authentic descriptions of their experience (Reybold et al., 2013). I accomplished this by being frank with the participants, explaining the purpose of this research. I approached this work with an open mind, eager to hear what participants identified as challenges and advantages, so that other low-income adult community college students could benefit. This desire to serve beyond the immediate population and the recognition of my own positionality, as well as the feedback of my dissertation committee, fostered an environment for receiving and reporting the data more objectively.

My concern was not limited to my own perspective about how my role would influence the research; the field may determine my role as a program administrator to be a potential threat to the study's trustworthiness. Lammert (as cited in Reybold et al., 2013) addressed this concern as it related to a study being worked on noting that,

although the project team did not intend to distort the research findings, their roles as program administrators seemed to influence the interviews and, therefore, the findings:

> While participants appeared at ease during the interview and talked freely about the difficulties they encountered—even criticizing certain aspects of the program—they did not stray too far from playing their "role" as program beneficiaries…. [When] they had "gone too far" with their critique, they began telling [the investigator] how nice and clean and organized one of the program investments was and expressed their thanks. (Lammert, as cited in Reybold et al., 2013, p. 708)

Lammert even went on to say that the resulting report could have been used as publicity for the program.

Because I have been an administrator for ALPHA since its inception in 2011, concerns about how my professional role could influence the outcomes of the study were discussed. However, it is important to note that the intent of this research was not to determine whether or not the program was successful, as that was well documented in the reported metrics that were released on a frequent basis. Instead, this research was focused on hearing directly from students how the holistic advising strategies that were applied in ALPHA affected the success of the participating adult learners.

This research focus was only strengthened by the fact that the researcher was informed about adult students, the culture within ALPHA, and the existing procedures and policies that were used at this community college. This familiarity and understanding led to improved knowledge and articulation of the issues in the final report. Because of

the informed perspective presented through this research, a greater effect will be realized for education policy and its influence on adult students.

Conclusion

In light of the increasing quantities of adult students in contemporary community colleges, the field must examine more closely what makes certain students succeed in an effort to replicate those results (Jenkins, 2015). Promising results have been observed in ALPHA's holistic advising program and, by reaching out to students using these services, more information can be gained about what works most effectively for this population.

Conducting this work in a program with which I was so familiar was not without risk. In order to be deemed credible research, I went to exhaustive lengths to reduce the probability that I might lead participants to indicate the value of supportive services they felt *I* thought were important. In order to achieve this, I carefully crafted interview questions as well as an explanation to the participants about my role as a researcher, seeking their honest opinions about what made them successful students when so many others had failed. I carefully constructed my recruitment email, consent form, and interview protocol with this in mind. I provided multiple reminders to students that participation was optional and that opting out of the study would yield no negative consequences.

The design choices and rationale for this project resulted in strong qualitative research for the field of higher education. Insight into the role that holistic advising plays in the success of low-income adult community college students had not yet been explored through existing research. For 17 years, I have been afforded the opportunity to work

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closely with adult students as they pursue higher education. I have seen countless

students fail, but I am particularly interested in what makes them succeed. ALPHA

incorporated a unique system that led to greater rates of success among program

participants. This research provided an opportunity to showcase what was working from

the perspective of the students who were succeeding in completing their identified

educational goal.

Chapter Four

This study explored the student experience of low-income adult students who participated in a holistic advising program. It also uncovered key policies and procedures that low-income adult community college students believe benefit or impede their success. These data were used to answer the following research questions:

1. From the students' perspectives, how do elements of holistic advising (such as single-source academic advising, financial aid advising, and public benefits access) affect low-income community college students?

2. From the students' perspectives, which community college policies or procedures have the most significant influence on their student experience?

This chapter presents the findings of this study. Case study provides "a detailed and rich" (Patton, 2015, p. 259) account of the unit that is studied, and this case study was no exception. The data revealed how tenuous most participants viewed the balance that allows them to succeed in college. When priorities include raising families, maintaining jobs, securing financial aid for college expenses, and accessing benefits to stabilize food, shelter, and financial security, it is easy to understand why participants reported highly valuing the holistic advising program in which they participated.

In addition, the complexity of their student experience was apparent. The transfer of coursework from other institutions and the implications of failing grades at their

current institutions, to having credit recognized for their work experience or foreign education, the participants in this study had multifaceted academic circumstances. These special situations demanded careful attention that they felt had been overlooked prior to joining ALPHA.

The participants in this study also emphasized a high level of career focus. Most expressed some kind of dissatisfaction in their previous lives, such as having been passed over for promotion or working long hours of hard labor. Whether they had left the workforce to pursue their studies or they were studying to advance in their existing field, participants emphasized the importance of career in their academic pursuits.

Another important theme in this study was the need for connection to their institution and other adult students. A sense of isolation among the participants in this study was present across multiple interviews. Although confidence and favor for their ALPHA advisor as a connection to their institution was present and made them feel as though they had someone by their side, many participants sought additional connections in the limited time they had available to spend focused on college.

Because this lens into the student experience provides such rich context, I have chosen to present the themes that arose from this research through profiles of the participants that show the human element of this work. I summarize the interview of each individual through a lens of each theme. I then direct the focus to each theme specifically, to explain how the individual experiences relate to each other and how the students indicated holistic advising affects the experience of participants.

Finally, after discussing the themes that arose regarding the student experience, I discuss the data that emerged regarding specific policies and procedures that affect the low-income community college student experience. Presentation of these findings is critical to providing insight to higher education administrators as to which policies and procedures have a significant effect on students such as those in this study. This will afford an opportunity to implement or maintain favorable policies and procedures going forward to support this population.

Student Profiles

Antoinette. Antoinette joined ALPHA in 2012, shortly after the program was developed. At the time of the interview, she was a full-time employee who had been taking classes one at a time, accruing credits toward a program that was recently removed from the college curriculum. She was told that she had three years from its elimination to complete her program of study, a situation that has forced her to take more classes each semester than she had in the past.

Antoinette was 55 years old and a mother of three grown children. She never believed she would attend college. She recalled in her interview that she remembers struggling in 12th grade, and that she never expected to go to college. Now that she was doing just that more than 35 years later, Antoinette found she does not have as much energy as her younger peers. She explained that after making one attempt in 1982 and another attempt a decade later, she saw this as her opportunity to finish what she had started.

The difference between herself and the younger students was profound for Antoinette. She described being "tired" and that when she gets home work at 7:00 in the evening, she wants to go to bed, but instead must start her school work. Antoinette described significant struggles academically, saying she "fail(s) almost all" of her exams. She said she studies, but feels it is too difficult to retain all of that information and believes that if she were younger, she would be better able to absorb it.

Antoinette explained that she has employed specific strategies to help her succeed in college, but added that they take time and concerted effort. For her online classes, she prints out all of the assignments early in the week, so she knows what she will need to do and then as she completes the tasks, she puts the date next to the item. She keeps a binder for each class and makes notes about to whom she responded in the discussion board, so that she can keep track.

Although Antoinette said she sees herself as a student who works, she admits that her job is her main priority. She tries to make sure she gets to know her professors so they know that if she does not turn something in, there is a "good reason why." Antoinette prides herself in being a "go-to person at work" and would not want anyone to feel like she was unable to help them because of her school schedule.

Antoinette does not receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, but she does not feel secure financially, even though she works full-time. She lives in public housing. During her interview, Antoinette described a situation in which she was able to use a community resource to help her. After her rent increased by more than $500 per month without notice, she took advantage of a program available through a

community agency that provided financial counseling in an effort to avoid bankruptcy. She does not recall whether she heard about this program through ALPHA or through her work, but she appreciated working one-on-one with a financial counselor. Ultimately, she still declared bankruptcy, but she valued the support.

Ella. Like some of the other participants, Ella is an immigrant to the United States. She escaped her home country where she was persecuted for her religious beliefs and moved with her husband. Ella joined ALPHA in 2013, while finishing her final semester in an adult high school program. She had been in a student development course that was offered on-site to graduating students and those who were completing their GED. She had been an active participant in ALPHA, but became disconnected and was returning to the program at the time of this study. At the time of the interview, Ella had recently completed a coenrollment program that allowed her to earn college credits while completing a workforce training program at a local nonprofit organization.

Ella decided to return to school in the midst of a difficult divorce and expressed significant uncertainty as she described her perspective: "I'm really overwhelmed, and I want to go forward in my life." I note this, because in many ways, Ella almost felt like a traditional-aged college student. Although she was 39, she had recently completed high school, had no children, and was going through a major life transition as she divorced her husband.

In her interview, Ella seemed to be reevaluating earlier decisions about her plan to study early childhood education in favor of a degree in business to pursue a career in finance. When asked whether she considered herself an employee who attends school or a

student who works, she responded that it was difficult to answer. She wanted to study full-time, but due to the divorce, her financial outlook was unclear. Later, when asked about ways the college could make it easier for adults to progress through their studies, she indicated a desire for more career exploration. Her enthusiasm for learning was apparent:

> Because I know right now I have a lot of potential. Before, I put it, for example, to take care of the others instead of to take care of me. That's why right now I know in the United States I'm very, very late to start, for example, to think about yourself and about your goals. That's why I find out I have a lot of interest to learning new things. Also, I want to improve my language. I want to improve my life. That's why I'm here.

In order to succeed in college, Ella said she needed accurate and specific guidance that she did not feel she would have received outside of ALPHA due to some of her previous interactions on campus. Because of cautionary tales from friends, she feared that some of her completed courses might not transfer to senior institutions. Mistrust of others was apparent throughout this interview. She expressed trust in ALPHA staff, but lacked confidence in those who work outside of ALPHA. Like many of the other participants, Ella indicated appreciation and confidence due to ALPHA staff responsiveness and appreciated that she knew her emails would be answered quickly and accurately.

When she described campus staff and student workers, in particular, her tone was quite different:

Some places…are not really professional. Sometimes they use students, and they

don't know how they have to direct and how they have to guide…I don't want to

label it "they don't care," but at their age…I don't want to blame them, because

that's appropriate at their age.

Even when she expressed confidence in the reputation of a particular campus for having

strong faculty, she seemed leery of the staff and wanted to talk to staff closer to her own

age because she had more confidence in the information and felt more respected.

Ella indicated that she knew of people who had been unable to access Pell Grants

due to their prior education, or in Ella's circumstance, lack of education. Ella said friends

had told her that she should not disclose that she had not completed high school because

then she could go right to college. She chose not to follow their advice. Although this

policy prohibited her from going to college until later, she was proud that she followed

her conscience.

Due to the high cost of living in the region where this study occurred, Ella was

able to take advantage of a first-time home buyer program. Although she had to commit

to owning the home for 30 years, her mortgage was guaranteed to be proportionate to her

income, which Ella indicated provided a great amount of security as she faced the

significant life chances ahead.

Jennifer. Jennifer has been in ALPHA since 2015. She joined ALPHA with a

variety of credits from different institutions, accumulated over a lengthy period as a

military spouse. She estimates that she has more than 60 credits, but was quick to point

out that they did not all apply toward her degree in early childhood education. Fed up

with getting passed over for promotion by people with degrees in unrelated fields and far less than her 25 years of experience, Jennifer traded her full-time job to attend school full-time.

While she did not qualify for any kind of public benefits, Jennifer did note that she receives a tuition waiver from the state because her spouse is a disabled military veteran. Although her education would be fully funded regardless of which state institution she chose, Jennifer came to the community college because she wanted small class sizes and proximity to her home. Jennifer also said she was more likely to feel confident if she returned to a community college instead of going directly to a university.

Finances had been an issue in the past as well. She explained that while she had never failed any classes in her earlier attempts in college, she had to withdraw because she could not afford childcare. When prodded, Jennifer explained that if she was in the same situation now that she is a part of ALPHA, she would reach out to her advisor to see if there was an alternative option to withdrawal. She also explained that in addition to her advisor, she would reach out to the mentor with whom she had been paired.

Jennifer expressed throughout her interview how alone she felt in her studies. "As an adult learner, you feel really isolated sometimes." Later, she explained, "It's hard to go when you're the oldest one in class." She shared a story about a class she took where she found herself sitting alongside students with whom her son had recently graduated. She was uncomfortable in the class and subsequently avoided class times or locations that were likely to be dominated by younger students.

Some of this isolation was assuaged when she found ALPHA. "You're just on your own as an adult student…. [Connecting with ALPHA] was so helpful because then it gave me a lot of hope." When she shared a story about a difficult situation she had encountered in an earlier semester, Jennifer explained: "At the other schools, I never had anything like ALPHA to reach out to. You sort of feel like you're just on your own, and you can't make it work; you don't have anybody to reach out to." Jennifer's connection to ALPHA made her feel like she was not "the only one." Because she is a full-time student, she takes advantage of using multiple campuses and military bases and also enrolls in online classes to gravitate toward people she considers her peers.

Connection to her institution is something Jennifer highly values. She explained that at her numerous other schools, she never really felt there was much support for adult learners. In ALPHA, she felt that someone was interested in her and her success and wanted to help her solve problems that arose. "It doesn't feel like there there's judgment there. It just really feels like they really want you to succeed. That's the impression I got was 'They're in it with you.'" That support made her feel more open to reaching out.

As she wrapped up her interview, Jennifer returned to the idea of connection and the need to know that she was not alone as an adult student. She explained that her mentor had suggested that she start an adult student group, but that she felt she was not the right person to do it since she would not be at the college for long. She also recognized the challenges with balancing priorities and how difficult adult students might find it to meet in person. She pondered whether the connection to other students might be

better in an online format where people could share tips and strategies. She then reflected on how much she would like to connect in person.

Jennifer needed customized support. With credits from so many different institutions and the intent to transfer in order to complete her bachelor's degree, a clear plan was critical. She said that the transfer of credits was her "biggest battle." Jennifer explained that before she heard about ALPHA, she had gone to the campus advising office and found that the experience was "really quick and wasn't very personal…I needed somebody that understood my situation." When she connected with her advisor in ALPHA, Jennifer was grateful that the advisor reviewed her whole history and expressed a genuine interest in her professional goals before providing different options on how to fulfill them. The advisor suggested Jennifer consider a class that would teach her to create portfolios to pursue credit for classes for which she might already have college-level competency from her professional experience. At the time of her interview, she had one portfolio completed and was awaiting feedback on whether she would receive the credit. Her advisor made her feel more "hopeful."

Jennifer has three children, ages 22, 19, and 12. She described what many of the student–parent participants indicated to varying degrees: "My kids came first." This caused participants to delay their education. She went on to explain that now she sees college attendance as a way to motivate her children: "I want to…set an example to my children that I could do it and not give up even if it took 30 years, not to give up, just to keep pursuing your dreams no matter what. Even if it takes longer, it doesn't matter. Just don't give up."

Jennifer talked about juggling her personal, professional, and academic demands during the interview. Toward the end of the interview, she referred to her experience as "a constant balancing act." She related her own experiences to her observations of her adult-student peers. She emphasized the focus she sees in adult students and the need to complete tasks to stay "on schedule" with academics, because "life, it doesn't happen on schedule. Your kids get sick or you're in the ER with your kid or your husband."

Toward the end of her interview, Jennifer shared her thoughts on what colleges could do for students like her to encourage them to progress successfully through their academic programs.

> I think having that individualized advisor, because I mean, really, that's I think what has prevented me from finishing my degree is things that would happen in life and not having like…people who would work for you to keep you on track. I guess that individualized approach for the advising, and then I think having more options like more class options, like, more easily to figure out, okay? Sometimes for adults it's really a challenge. Even for kids just out of high school, it's so hard to put your schedule together. It's such a puzzle. For adults, it's just even more difficult.

Kevin. Kevin's profile was highlighted in the opening vignette of this dissertation. He attempted college soon after graduating from high school, but as a first-generation college student who also needed to work, so he struggled academically and left after his first semester. He joined ALPHA in 2014 after watching his wife

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successfully navigate her college enrollment, career, and parenting in part due to her connection with ALPHA.

Kevin's interview differed from the others. Not only did he offer the only male perspective in the study, but he is also the spouse of another participant, Oma. Additionally, he offered a slightly different perspective because after joining ALPHA, Kevin was hired as a financial aid funded work-study in the program.

In his interview, Kevin spoke extensively about the importance of accessing community and public benefits to support his family while he and his wife pursued their college education. Kevin and Oma receive SNAP and had previously received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as well. He expressed confusion about the exact reason his TANF funds had been curtailed. The funds simply stopped, and when he and his wife asked what had happened, they were told that their wages were too high, even though they each only work part-time in addition to their academic demands.

In addition to public benefits, he described two community agencies that provide groceries and holiday meals. This became incredibly important over the past year:

> They've been really helpful because we had SNAP cut off for a few months, maybe four months in the last...in the last six months—I think we had SNAP cut off for about four to five months. We also didn't realize what happened, we were like, "What's going on? We're not getting SNAP anymore." We were struggling for a while. I don't know exactly where my wife got the information from, but this organization provides us with...every two weeks they provide us with either a

$100 gift card, it's rotating, a $100 gift card, and then two weeks later they

provide us with a bunch of groceries.

Just as he described with TANF, when Kevin's SNAP benefits were ending, he
did not recall any form of communication to let him and his wife know that a resource
they depended on would be terminated. When he reached out to get answers about what
had happened to the funding, it was unclear to whom he should talk, as there was a large
number of case workers.

Kevin expressed his frustration and shared his perspective about relying on
benefits:

When we are in the position, we promise we will never—It's kind of like a

horrible thing to be on, because...it seems like it's a whole other task in itself that

requires X number of hours, in maybe in a semester. It's very complicated to be

on top of things, because if it's not a renewal for this, then something is expiring.

It's confusing because, like I said, there's different case workers. Then, there's

different income limits as well, so you're constantly trying to remember the

income limit for Medicaid, which we don't have, [my wife] or I, our son does.

The SNAP, it's a different limit, and the TANF is a different limit. There's all

these different limits.

The struggle to keep food on the table for his young family and his own fears
about returning to college make it easy to understand why Kevin felt intimidated. He
recounted how overwhelmed he felt as he navigated the necessary paperwork and
processes to re-enroll in college:

The application process, I didn't know how difficult that was going to be. I didn't know if I was going to need a whole bunch of documentation. [My access advisor] helped me out through the application process…. I didn't know about the financial aid…. Financial aid is intimidating. It has always been intimidating…. As far as personal information goes, a lot of people, I think, get intimidated from that information. The taxes…taxes scare everybody. Taxes, I don't know, what does it need taxes for? That scares people, even though it shouldn't, for financial aid. It was just a lot of things that we didn't know, or how smooth it was going to be, or how difficult it is. That was a big barrier as well. Also, choosing classes is a big barrier. You don't know what you want to do. You don't know how difficult that scheduling is going to be. You don't know if you have time for it. All these are barriers that just prevent people from like…"It's too hard, I don't feel like doing it."

When Kevin was asked about whether he sees himself as a student who works or an employee who attends school, he replied that it was a difficult question to answer. When he first attempted college a few years before joining ALPHA, he saw himself as an employee who attended school, but he feels that perspective led him to struggle at school, so now he sees himself as a student who works.

Kevin's failing grades from his first attempt at college five years before left him in Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) warning status. He explained how the support of ALPHA gave him the confidence that he could come back. Although he did not understand what a SAP warning was, his advisor explained that he had no choice but to

do well in his first semester. He relied on constant communication between his advisor

and himself and he indicated that because he knew someone would be holding him

accountable, he was motivated to stay on track.

When Kevin attended college five years ago, he could not manage his work–life

balance. With the support of ALPHA, Kevin has maintained a 4.0 GPA each of the past

five semesters. His pride in this accomplishment is palpable:

> I didn't know I could do it…I didn't know I had it in me. And I—some people
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> just think that "Maybe I'm just not made for college, maybe I'm just not fit for
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> college," but it's about applying yourself. That's something I had to unlock, I had
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> to kind of unleash for myself……. The difference between back then and now
>
> was right now I feel like I HAVE to. Really! I'm hungry for it.

This statement was powerful. Kevin was a student who had already experienced

the frustration of struggling in college and believed he would never successfully

graduate. However, in just a few semesters, he was able to view himself in a new light.

He knew he would succeed and took on each challenge with the confidence of someone

who knows that he must overcome any obstacle.

Kevin also explained that he feels "pressure" to set an example for his younger

brothers and his son, even though he was not confident about what he was supposed to be

doing. Although he is proving to be successful academically, it comes at a cost. Kevin

wants to be involved at school and in his son's life, but he admits that he is drained at the

end of each day, and it affects his ability to be the father he wants to be to his son.

I feel like I'm getting pulled in every direction, or there are responsibilities that

pull me in that direction…you've got to pay the bills. That becomes more of a

priority right there, more of a task at hand, more than doing homework. Being a

parent…forget doing my homework.

Juggling his academic, professional, and personal demands is a struggle, and

when combined with the cumbersome paperwork required to maintain his family's

benefits, it can be overwhelming. He explained: "in a perfect world, I wish that there was

one person that could give a presentation…goes over the overview of everything." He

would like to see the college provide informed case managers who share their knowledge

of social benefits as well as academic issues. Although he is grateful for the public

benefits his family receives, his frustration is apparent:

It's very confusing, the whole social services process. Not to throw them under

the bus, but a lot of their staff, they're really rude. They're really rude, and they

make you feel like you shouldn't be here applying for this. "You should get a

damn job!" That's what it feels like sometimes. That's what my case manager for

TANF kind of made me feel like as well. Where you know…"The goal here is to

get you a full-time job." We've had conversations with her, my wife and I, where

we're just like, "This is our plan. We're trying to go to school so we can get an

education and actually land a career and not have to rely on this ever again in our

lives." Their goal is to get you a full-time job, with no education, kind of. That's

where I kind of get lost and confused, because I'm not sure what their goal is. I'm

not sure what social services, in any departments...Medicaid, what's your goal?

You just want to give insurance for the meantime, or what do you want to do? TANF, I kind of understand, I've read through the details. But, I don't understand what do you want me to do? Do you want me to go fast in school while I work and get a career? Or do you want me just to get a full-time—what do you want from me? I'm not understanding that. And as far as SNAP goes, it's like, "SNAP, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to get a full-time job and never be on SNAP again? Or do you want me to just not apply for SNAP at all?" It's confusing sometimes what they want from us.

Oma. Oma joined ALPHA in 2013 and has been pursuing her degree in early childhood education. As mentioned above, she is married to Kevin. Oma was a teen parent of a son who is now five years old. When she was trying to complete high school through an alternative high school program, she was connected with a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving teen parents as they transition to college. Oma was orphaned as a teenager, but she became the first in her family to attend college. Both of her parents were immigrants who came to the United States for "a better life." They worked hard, and her brothers have followed their parents' paths and chose not to pursue higher education. Her mother worked in childcare, which inspired Oma to pursue that field as well.

My interview with Oma was the shortest interview of the eight, but I was left with an overwhelming sense of her "grit." Oma is a fighter. Despite facing incredibly challenging circumstances, she refuses to succumb to the obstacles before her. Oma described the challenges that she and her young family face:

We're renting the basement of my brother's house. Thank God. He doesn't charge us too much because he knows our situation. We've been struggling with getting assistance from the government. Every time we try to apply, there's always an issue. So…sometimes we don't have money to pay bills or money for food or money for gas or anything. It's a really tough situation. That's why we're trying to get out of at least [college], because I know it will give us a better opportunity.

She explained that her experience has been that government agencies do not want to support students. Whenever she has mentioned that she and her husband are students, the agencies see "a red flag…these are the people we don't want to help." She feels that somewhat artificial barriers are put into place to prevent her family from qualifying for assistance. Because they are not looking for full-time work due to their academic and personal demands, they do not qualify for some programs. When I asked about their work obligations, she included scholarships as part of her family's income.

Just as Kevin explained, Oma said their family uses a variety of community and public benefits to stabilize their lives. Through the nonprofit for teen parents, Oma was assigned a mentor to support her educational pursuits. This individual also happened to be a career counselor for ALPHA, which led her to join the program. Oma explained more about the nonprofit program for teen parents.

They've helped me financially because it's a scholarship program, so every semester, I receive $600 through their program. And then they provide us with trainings at least every three months…. It can be like building up your resume. It

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can be how to be a better parent. Ummm…just different types of training that can

benefit us as young students.

The focus that ALPHA places on career was important to Oma. She pointed out

that through the advice of her ALPHA advisor, she had been able to earn credentials

faster and that they stacked upon each other to ensure that she was not wasting time. Each

certificate she earned has provided her with a better position in her field. Oma indicated

she would not have been able to do that without the support of her advisor.

The slow rate at which she is completing her education is also frustrating for

Oma. She believes that if her parents were still alive, they would have helped to pay for

her education, and that it might improve the balance she tries to maintain. She pointed out

that the multiple roles she has—mother, student, and employee—make it harder to

succeed than if she had been a traditional student.

Oma seemed to feel that the college she attends was supporting nontraditional

students in significant ways. When pressed to elaborate on what makes it easier or more

efficient for her to complete her degree, she said she must work, so scheduling classes on

days that she does not have to work is important. She noted that the limited amount of

financial aid she and her husband receive forces them to work in order to provide for their

family. She, too, noted that having some kind of childcare on campus would be helpful.

Oma reflected on how this would benefit all student-parents as well as the students

interested in early childhood education:

I know in high schools…kids that are interested in early childhood; they have day

cares there that you can volunteer and work there to gain that experience and

knowledge. Maybe instead of us working, maybe they can have a childcare center

here that can maybe give us a little bit of income, too, or we can volunteer.

Oma reported the lowest rating in terms of where she feels she is on the continuum of

thriving to surviving. She explained that her difficult life circumstances have caused

depression and anxiety and have affected her ability to be the best mother she can be. "I

feel like my family and I are just living day by day, paycheck to paycheck. We are on that

road of thriving, but life is not great right now, I guess."

Ommohamed. Ommohamed has been in ALPHA since 2011. She is the mother

of two children, ages 9 and 12. She was assigned to the researcher's caseload when she

first joined ALPHA and was later transferred to another advisor when the researcher no

longer maintained a student caseload. Like many working parents, she has been forced to

take classes at a slow pace due to the demands on her personal time. Unlike most

students, she is forced to take classes at an even slower rate, because she has to pay for all

of her classes out of her own pocket. Ommohamed earned a degree in her home country

before immigrating to the United States. Thus, she does not qualify for a Pell Grant.

Like many educated immigrants, Ommohamed earned a degree that does not

translate well to employment in the United States. She had earned a degree in veterinary

science, but described her program as being too technical to find comparable work in the

United States. Additionally, she had earned the degree nearly 20 years before

immigrating, which she said made the degree "unusable," even though she had worked in

the field right up until she immigrated.

Ommohamed identifies herself as an employee who attends school, rather than a student who works. This distinction was consistent throughout her interview as she described her desire to attend college in order to continue learning to support her work in the field of education. While she is currently a teacher's aide, she hopes to eventually become a full-time teacher either in a high school or a preschool. Her schooling is focused on advancing in her career field.

When asked about how her involvement in ALPHA contributes to her experience in college, she pointed out that it had opened many doors she thought had been closed to her. She explained that she found ALPHA's staff to be more "helpful" and "accessible" and noted that "they respond to any concern that you have or the follow up…during the semester."

Ommohamed emphasized the support she received from her advisor in the evaluation of her degree. The requirement to have her degree evaluated had prevented her "from going back to school for years, because [she] didn't know how to get it done." As an immigrant from a war-torn country, accessing her records and knowing where to send them to complete the evaluation process prevented her from enrolling because her financial aid could not be processed without verification of her degree.

After shouldering the expense of the evaluation and having the evaluation interpreted by the college, she discovered she was not eligible for a Pell Grant, and the college would award just six credits, none of which applied to her primary degree program. Ommohamed described how challenging she found enrollment due to the lack of financial support available to her: "the harder part was the financial situation, because

I couldn't afford to pay out of pocket, and I wasn't qualified for any grant or anything, and I wasn't in a position to take loans and pay for it." If not for her "unusable" degree, she believes financially she would qualify for a Pell Grant, so the struggle to pay for classes on low wages is difficult. She estimated that with Pell, she would focus much more on school, taking as many as six classes each semester.

Access to public benefits is another critical element to Ommohamed's success. Her children receive free lunch at school. Additionally, she heard through a friend about an affordable housing program and chose to take advantage of the program: "The housing in [area masked] is crazy. If I paid for market rent, I wouldn't be able. I would be working two shifts. Having that in mind, I can attend. I can have one job and attend college in evenings. It helped me."

Ommohamed described how different she feels about attending college now as compared to when she attended the first time: "I think it was easier back then because I didn't have that stress of all the other life obligations. I have to work; I have to raise a family."

Like some of the other participants, Ommohamed expressed appreciation for the availability of classes at different times and online. At the end of the interview, she also discussed the importance of transitional support at the conclusion of her program of study.

Sasha. Sasha joined ALPHA in 2014. She indicated she feels like she has "always" been a student at the college because she has been attending off and on for the past seven or eight years. During that time, she has accumulated approximately 55

credits. Unlike most of the participants, Sasha receives no public or community-based benefits to support herself and her children.

When asked whether she receives benefits, Sasha said, "I wish I could…. It's hard for middle class, because they see what you make before taxes and then don't realize all the bills you have to pay." Sasha works full-time and described feeling like an employee who works, because most of her time is spent at work and also because she is only able to take classes on a part-time basis.

Like many of the participants, this was not Sasha's first attempt at higher education. She explained that her dream had been to attend a historically Black college located a few hours from where she lives now. She reflected on her experience attending a special summer program to become competitive for the school and the pride with which she was filled when she was accepted. Sadly, she could not afford the school, so she returned home to begin working. She worked at a shopping mall and at some point realized that she had lost focus of her dream of entering broadcasting.

Sasha enrolled in the community college, but believes she was not very successful because she did not take her classes seriously until after her daughter, now 6, was born when she was 22. This motivation made her feel more determined because she "didn't want to just be working at the mall with a high school diploma." As some of the other participants indicated, having a child and trying to attend college as an adult gave her inspiration she needed to create a better life than the one she had been living.

Sasha said ALPHA has "contributed a lot" to her college experience. She enjoys being a part of a program that recognizes the differences among adult students. The

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individual support makes her feel more comfortable asking the questions she has, and she has the sense that they "understand" what adult students face as they balance school and their professional lives. Like other participants, she noted that she appreciated that when she sends an email, she can count on a quick response and that a single point of contact could inform her with financial aid, enrollment, and advising questions. "It's nice to have, like, someone to talk to and guide you who knows exactly where you're coming from as an adult."

As a student who had struggled academically in the past, Sasha particularly appreciated the opportunity to ask all of the questions she felt she needed to ask. As other participants expressed, she felt very comfortable with her advisor and had a significant amount of confidence in what she was advised. Prior to joining ALPHA, Sasha failed a summer class when she took on too much. She believes that if she had been in ALPHA, she would not have enrolled in the class. She explained how her ALPHA advisor helped her during the subsequent summer to think through the consequences of an enrollment decision she might otherwise have made. Her advisor explained the pace of the class would be much faster and that as a parent, she might want to go on vacation during the summer, which would affect her ability to succeed in her class. Instead, her advisor encouraged Sasha to devise a plan to limit summer enrollment and focus on fall and spring enrollment. This made Sasha feel more in control and like she had a plan.

In addition to her academic needs, Sasha has benefitted from career advice. She explained that her ALPHA advisor let her know about workshops, internships, and the college's job database. Her advisor also offered to review her resume.

While many of the participants expressed appreciation for the flexibility of being able to take classes at multiple locations, Sasha expressed some of the associated challenges. Although has taken advantage of classes at other campuses because of the limited offerings at her local campus, she discovered that she was required to also test at the distant campuses between classes. For example, in her math class that she took on Saturday mornings, she had to drive 40 minutes each way for class on Saturday, but the computer-based exams that would allow her to advance to the next module also had to be taken at the campus where she was taking the class. Thus, in order to progress, she was required to find time to travel to that campus's testing center during the week to test when she also needed to work. This time commitment was even more difficult due to the heavy midweek traffic. Moreover, because of the nature of the class, she had to test and retest multiple times. With computer-based testing, she was frustrated at the hours of additional commuting needed to test at the campus where she was enrolled in the math class instead of having access to test at her local campus. Travelling such a long distance for these tests throughout the semester was a difficult and frustrating experience for her.

Childcare has also presented a challenge for Sasha. Attending classes or testing when she was not working means that she must arrange childcare. During her math class, testing during the week meant "being in meetings and working all day," then trying to find someone to pick up her daughter from after-school care while she sat in heavy traffic, then taking her exam, and finally rushing home to help her daughter prepare for school the next day. Certainly, this is not an ideal situation for student-parents to succeed in classes they find difficult. In one circumstance, she was not able to find childcare and

felt she had no option other than bringing her daughter to the testing center. She sat her at a table, and although the staff said she was not permitted to bring her daughter, they allowed her to do so that time.

Sasha described the precariousness of her situation as it relates to raising her daughter while attending school. When scheduling classes, she often has to travel 45 minutes to an hour to get the classes she needs at times that work for her schedule because her closest campus is fairly small. For these classes, she relies on her boyfriend to pick up her daughter, but if he is afforded a chance for overtime, she feels she would have to tell her professor she could not attend class for the evening. She expressed how she depends on professors' flexibility and understanding, while also recognizing that she is responsible for being in class.

> It would be nice to just say, "They're definitely trying. They're in this program and they have full-time job and then you have two kids." I wish, like, there was some way that the school would give us a break basically. I know—I get nervous because you know that people would take advantage. It's tough [being an adult student]. You got to pull through, stay up all night if you have to, block off your weekends if you have to because you're just expected to get your work done just as much as a 16-year-old that have [sic] nothing else to do in their life.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Sasha, a speech communication major, to describe what she would say to a room of higher education administrators regarding how to make higher education work for those who missed the opportunity to attend when they were traditional aged:

I would just give the reality of it: Not everyone can follow that path of high

school, straight to college, and then marriage and then kids. Life happens…. It

would be nice if there was a little bit more understanding of that in college and

then I would give the reasons…: cost is an issue, time management, just having

some patience…. I just think understanding where adults come from and getting

something from it like, if I'm saying, "Hey, I have a kid. I'm at work. I'm

struggling. I'm trying to pay the bill as a single mom." I didn't want to be a single

mom. It happens. I really, ultimately, wanted to go to school.

Syd. Syd has been a part of ALPHA since 2014. Unlike many of the other

participants in this study, Syd does not have children and does not work. She is on Social

Security Disability. She uses SNAP benefits and Medicaid. She returned to school after

attending 20 years ago when she realized she had no technical skills and wanted to start a

career. With the support of her mother, a monthly stipend, SNAP benefits, and health

insurance, she believed this was the perfect time to return to college to develop a skill and

return to work.

Syd attributes her success to the support that she received from ALPHA.

Interested in a competitive medical program, she found applications were only accepted

once per year, and her GPA was too low for admission due to the grades on her record

from 20 years before. Her ALPHA advisor explained a policy by which students who had

not been enrolled in the college for many years could apply for academic renewal after

successfully completing 12 credits. Academic renewal would eliminate the failing grades

from calculation into the students' GPA. However, as Syd explained, she was unclear

about what she could take in addition to her prerequisites while she awaited admission to her program:

> All those classes that I took during that time was because [my advisor] did the work to find out what I could take without being in a program. I wouldn't have been able to figure that out. A lot of it was you have to be in the program or have professor authorization. Well I wouldn't even know how to get professor authorization, not knowing the professors. She helped me with a lot of that.

Because of the support of her advisor, Syd was able to take the majority of her classes before admission into the program. She compared her own experience to that of one of her classmates and explained that the other student was "swamped her first semester with 12 credits" and ended up nearly failing out of the program. Because many of the classes are offered in sequence, the student had to continue with borderline foundational skills because she had not been advised of her options before admission into the program. Syd felt that she might have been in a similar situation if not for her advisor carefully plotting out classes that could be completed before admission into her program.

Syd also relied on her ALPHA advisor for financial aid advice. She explained the difference between working with her ALPHA advisor and going to the campus financial aid office:

> I get this notice that I'm not going to get financial aid for next semester. It's over. What am I going to do? I have no financial aid, I'm on disability. I explained it to [my advisor] and I tell you what, she walked me through every little step to file the appeal and get it, she even pushed it forward so I wouldn't have a problem for

spring because I wanted to take spring classes. If I didn't have her, I don't think I would've been able to get through that. When I would go to an advisor at financial aid, they weren't very helpful because I didn't know exactly how everything worked. So, I couldn't ask the right questions, they couldn't give me the right answers.

Syd described feeling like an outsider. She explained that after more than a decade out of school, you "lose all that rhythm of studying and understanding." While she worked with her younger classmates on projects, she felt as though she did not fit with the other students: "Kids, who, they wait until the last minute to turn something in. They really only give a half-assed job. And I—granted, I was the same way when I was their age, but it's harder when I'm an adult. I know I have more responsibility."

The sense that she was on the outside was not always negative. Syd explained that due to her involvement with ALPHA, she felt much more informed about policy and campus-related information than did her classmates. This connection to the college was very important to Syd, and it boosted her confidence.

Although Syd's academic situation was quite complex and demanded significant customized advice to progress, she spent relatively less time dwelling on extracurricular problems as compared to the other participants. This was likely due to her lack of children and work obligations, which would have competed for her attention. Instead, she focused on how her advisor served as a lifeline. She felt her advisor was accessible, knowledgeable, and flexible. "I don't know how she does it…. I just never feel like I'm in the limbo area with her," Syd said.

Themes Across Interviews

Four themes rose distinctly in the interviews with participants. First, low-income adult community college students face challenges of balancing of their academic, personal, and professional responsibilities. This theme can be broken into smaller categories that focus on the role that family obligations play in rate of attendance, the challenges of finances for low-income adult community college students, the adult student experience as a catalyst for drive, and the importance of accessibility of their advisor in maintaining balance.

The second theme is related to the value of holistic advising in managing the complexity of the situations many low-income adult community college students face. The third theme that arose was related to the heavy emphasis on career, both in the pursuit of higher education as a means for advancement and the struggles of maintaining a career while studying. The fourth theme is related to participants' desires to connect with the institution and their peers. This comes through their curricular choices, desires to join groups of adult students, and occasionally in their relationships with their professors. Finally, students identified specific policies and practices that affected their student experience. Below, I discuss each of these themes and relate them back to the interview data.

Balancing priorities. While numerous themes emerged from this study, one stood out far above the rest: balance. In this section, I discuss balance as it relates to family obligations, finance, and student motivation. I conclude the section by recounting how participants indicated their holistic advisor assists in managing this balance.

The difficulty of managing professional, personal, and academic responsibilities is clear. Every participant in this study identified balance as a challenge, and it was a recurrent theme across multiple questions that were written to address various elements of their experiences. Although this theme was not a surprise, it was more prevalent than the researcher had expected and appeared to indicate the precariousness of the balance that each participant must strike. Competing responsibilities demanded shifting priorities, which caused balance to become an unachievable aspiration. Kevin noted how he might commit to completing homework for school the next day, but if his son is hungry or needs other attention, he knows that his son's needs will come first. This need to attend to the most pressing tasks when all seem critical can be taxing on students.

Time as a finite resource presents a significant obstacle for adult students. Some participants said they must focus more on academics than on the cocurricular offerings at the college. Kevin said, "There's more I want to get involved with, as far as college organizations and clubs or associations, but time doesn't allow it." He went on to explain his efforts to juggle his class schedule with that of his wife and also his son's day care schedule, along with work obligations, and efforts to secure benefits. Sasha said something similar, "It's just time. I feel when I was younger, I had more time on my hands." Although participants all described competing priorities, none indicated that there was a specific outcome that would indicate that had achieved balance. Instead, balance was a process of prioritizing obligations without failing to attend to a commitment.

Obligations limit engagement in college, but these impositions on students' time are not all negative. Participants were asked about what is different between their

experience in college and the experience of traditional-aged students. All participants made some kind of reference to their drive to succeed in college and how they feel more inspired as adult students than their younger peers.

Family obligations affect pace. Adult students' competing priorities force most of them to attend at a slower pace than they would prefer. Prioritizing family members before their education was a clear impediment to pace that arose across interviews. Ella referred to the need to support her husband as a reason she had delayed her education. Jennifer said something similar. When her husband experienced a health crisis, she immediately changed her college enrollment to ensure she could care for him. Antoinette, similarly, explained that the reason she put her education on hold during the 1980s and again in the 1990s was due to her parenting responsibilities.

Many participants brought up the issue of childcare and expressed that child-rearing while attending college presented numerous challenges in terms of their ability to progress. Antoinette, Kevin, Jennifer, Ommohamed, and Sasha all specifically mentioned in their interviews that raising children while attending school had affected their enrollment.

Participants reported that it seemed like it would be easier to attend school when they were younger because there were not as many considerations affecting their ability to attend college. Oma said, "It's been harder for me, being a mom; being a wife; being a worker, supporter—everything to finish up [institution masked]. As an adult, it is harder."

Financial concerns. Finances are a major concern among this population. Although household income was not specified as a qualification for this study, most

ALPHA participants are low-income. Most have children, and although any of the participants expressed an interest in attending college at a faster rate, they must work in order to provide for their families. Three worked full-time in addition to enrolling in college. Four worked part-time. And one received Social Security Disability.

In addition to the time dedicated to academics, work, and family obligations, some of the participants in this study also felt pressure due to the amount of time that they spend trying to secure public benefits to help their families survive. Oma and Kevin, the married couple in this study, underscored the plight of some low-income community college students. As described in Kevin's profile above, resources that are intended to stabilize low-income families sometimes cause a sense of insecurity when they are terminated without notice. In addition to part-time jobs, Kevin and Oma use SNAP, were recently cut off from TANF, and rely on community-based organizations to provide food, depend on a nonprofit for scholarship funding, receive Pell and other grant aid, and have no health insurance for themselves. They both indicated that they spend a significant amount of time applying for and trying to maintain benefits, while also applying for scholarships, working, and raising a young family in an area with a high cost of living.

Kevin explained ways that he tries to save money. He struggles to decide between buying groceries and buying textbooks. Desperate to make ends meet, Kevin even looks at professor reviews online to find which are least likely to require a textbook. With such weighty financial struggles, it is easy to understand why so many low-income adult community college students struggle to maintain enrollment.

Knowing that ALPHA wants to support them in establishing a strong safety net of supportive services was mentioned throughout the interviews. Whether it was guidance in accessing federal aid or information about scholarships that would allow Pell-eligible students to afford the more expensive university education, the affordability of attending college as an adult student was mentioned in almost all of the interviews. Students' worries about affordability extended beyond the community college. Some participants, looking toward transfer, realize their Pell Grants will not be sufficient for covering their expenses and expressed concern for their future.

The adult student experience as a catalyst for drive. As noted above, the interview protocol included a question that asked participants how they view their experience as an adult student to be different than that of their traditional-aged peers or from their own experience as a younger student. I sought to uncover what they felt made it so difficult for adult students to succeed. While there was a heavy focus on the obstacles they face as adult students, many participants also saw their status as an advantage.

Every participant indicated that they believed adult students have more drive and/or that the stakes seemed higher for them when they considered how their experiences compared to those of traditional-aged students. Ommohamed said simply, "I think I'm just more focused [than traditional-aged students]." Sasha said, "I didn't really get serious...until after I had my daughter, because [it was then that] I realized time was going. And, I'm like, 'I got to get serious, because I don't want to just be working at the

mall.'" Kevin's experience after becoming a parent was similar. He explained this

further:

> They [traditional-aged students] really don't understand how serious it is. How
> much work and how much effort you're going to have to put in to it, into
> succeeding in college. And that was me. I didn't know how serious it was…. Five
> years later, through my personal experiences and my obstacles, that's what kind
> of made me hungry for it. It's what made me want it. Right now, here I am, five
> years later: I want it more than ever. My dedication, it's there. It's second to none
> especially comparing it to 2009 when I [started as a traditional-aged student].

Kevin discussed the idea of unleashing something within himself that empowered
him to succeed. He suggested that applying oneself is something that can be unlocked
and that he was able to do so with the supportive environment provided by ALPHA.

Jennifer seemed to have a slightly different perspective when she reflected on her
own children and other traditional-aged students attending college.

> It's their time to discover themselves…and they can be selfish, right? As an adult
> learner, when you go back to school, you can't be 100% selfish and just focus on
> yourself…. We have all this stuff that we're dealing with, so much more
> responsibilities [sic] and worries, and we know a lot more about life….
> Sometimes ignorance is bliss. When you're younger, just that: "I can do
> anything." I think it's more challenging as an adult. Definitely.

Accessibility to their advisor. With so many competing priorities, balance is not
easy to maintain. When a problem arises, it could easily test that balance. Thus,

participants indicated a high level of appreciation for the multiple ways they could reach their advisors.

Syd explained that she was impressed by the accessibility of her advisor. She could reach out to her via email, text, phone, or in person. She explained that in some circumstances, she even sent her advisor pictures from her phone of forms with which she needed assistance. "I don't know how she does it…. She returns my emails like this [snapping her fingers]; she returns my calls like that [snapping her fingers]. I just never feel like I'm in limbo." Similarly, Kevin explained, "She communicates with you whenever you have a question…. I'll email her …when I'm doing homework [at night] and at 7:30 in the morning I'll have a reply when I wake up."

Sasha spoke about how her ability to email her advisor in ALPHA helps her to overcome the challenges she faced as a full-time employee:

> ALPHA just lets me feel I have somebody to constantly just ask a quick question via email, versus driving…. You have to work 8:00 to 5:00, yet the counselors will only be there 8:00 to 6:00, and then I may not make it in time. I think, ALPHA, for me, I just feel that it's more convenient, and it's more understanding as far as if I have any questions about signing up, FAFSA or which classes I should take, when I should take them. It's nice to have, like, someone to talk to and guide you who knows exactly where you're coming from as an adult.

Ella said something similar, "Any time, any moment…I have a question, I send you email, you responded. It was good feeling for me, because I was thinking, 'Okay, somebody is going to be there for me.'"

When describing his experience in ALPHA, Kevin explained:

They know what your end goal is.... That's something that I didn't, that feeling,

that vibe, I didn't get that at the [campus advising office].... She understands that

we have to work out, not just my schedule and my son's schedule, but my

schedule and my son's schedule and [my wife's] schedule.... So, she—obstacles

like SNAP, obstacles like TANF, just financial obstacles that we've had lately.

She's aware of that. We share pretty much anything with her. We're comfortable

sharing anything with [our success advisor] because we know she'll pull through,

as far as providing resources, a solution to a problem, or suggestions to things we

might want to look at.

Feeling that they have access to their ALPHA advisor led to a greater sense of

confidence among participants, who then felt that they had the information they needed

when they needed it. Multiple participants in ALPHA said they had heard directly from

students not in the program who were unaware of important information that the ALPHA

students knew about because their advisors had told them. This connection is valuable in

supporting the balance low-income adult students must strike.

Managing complexity. In just this small selection of students, participant

experiences included lack of success in previous enrollment, degrees from foreign

countries, changes in major, financial aid ineligibility, prior learning assessment (PLA),

raising children while working, the need for social service and/or community benefits,

and transfer issues into the college as well as transfer after degree completion. The

advantage of having a single point of contact to navigate all of these hurdles appears to be the key to success for the participants in this study.

Educational statistics indicate that nontraditional students are a significant part of the college population. The interviews with these participants, however, seemed to indicate an overall lack of confidence about the information that general academic advisors provide to adult students. Due to the variety of factors described above that affect adult students and may not be associated with traditional students, the participants in this study suggested that they felt that they confused the advisors or received rote answers for what they deemed very specific circumstances.

For example, Ommohamed had spent years trying to begin college. She needed to figure out how to go about getting her degree from a foreign country evaluated. She was uncertain whether it was equivalent to an American baccalaureate degree. She needed official transcripts, but had graduated from a war-torn country nearly 20 years before immigrating to the United States, so trying to get official documents from the ministry of education in her home country was extraordinarily difficult. Her ALPHA advisor walked her through each step, explaining how the process would work. Although she was disqualified from receiving a Pell Grant when her degree was deemed equivalent to an American bachelor's degree, she was finally able to enroll after waiting for years to complete the process.

Jennifer described how she had attended numerous colleges while living abroad as a military spouse. Each time she would contend with loss of credit, and she felt like the colleges were not interested in supporting adult students or making use of the credits they

had earned elsewhere. Once she was connected with ALPHA at her current institution, she felt as though her advisor was interested in helping her transfer as much of her credit as possible, and it gave her a significant amount of hope that completion was within her reach this time. Not only did she and her advisor plan for graduation at her current institution, but her advisor also customized her plan to prepare for the adult student program to which she would transfer at the local university.

Other students indicated challenges with poor performance in previous attempts at the college. With grades from years past lingering on their records, it was difficult for many students to know how to get on track. Their ALPHA advisors were able to share policies and practices that would minimize the negative effects of earlier attempts at college.

Nontraditional students make up a significant proportion of the college student population. However, they arrive with vastly different backgrounds from traditional students and even from each other. Due to these special circumstances, students in this study appreciated the dedicated support from knowledgeable staff in ALPHA.

Career focus. The career focus described in this section is two-fold. First, the majority of participants are working while attending college. This affects when they can take classes and the level of engagement with the college they experience. Second, most students are in college with a focus on their chosen career. Whether related to their current occupation or not, participants reported career aspirations as a primary reason for attending college.

Antoinette, Kevin, Jennifer, Ommohamed, and Sasha described how their current or past work prevented them from taking more classes than they might otherwise have taken. However, they benefited from the course offerings in the evening, on weekends, and online. Although work affects their ability to take classes, for most, work experience has proven to be an asset or motivator in the classroom. The desire to advance professionally and also to apply on the job skills they have learned in the classroom is an asset in persisting in college.

Antoinette explained that her return to school was a result of advertisements at her place of employment about a partnership with the local community college. Although she did not feel professional pressure to continue her education, she saw the opportunity to finish what she had started when she first enrolled back in the 1980s. She had tried taking classes at different times over the 30 years in between, but the demands of working, raising three children, and attending school proved to be too challenging. With her children out of the house, she capitalized on the opportunity to complete a degree in business management with an administrative focus, which closely related to her work as an administrative assistant. She seemed pleasantly surprised by the skills she learned in class and her ability to practice them professionally and in community organizations. Her interview suggested that there is reciprocity in applying her skills. Without realizing it, Antoinette explained ways in which her professional skills contributed to her college experience in the way she has led projects and organized group work in the classroom.

ALPHA places a strong emphasis on career paths and working toward the job one wants. This focus was prevalent in participant responses. Some participants noted the

correlation between their studies and careers they have had since before enrolling in classes. Ommohamed expressed a desire to "keep learning" about the field in which she currently works. Although it is a different field than the one in which she worked in her home country, she wants to advance in her new line of work.

Similarly, Jennifer found she had hit a professional wall that she could not overcome without additional formal education. Although she has worked in her field for 25 years, completed extensive professional development, and enrolled in numerous college classes related to her profession, Jennifer indicated that the catalyst for her most recent enrollment occurred when she mistakenly discovered that a colleague with a degree in an unrelated field was earning three times as much as she was.

Kevin and Oma focus on career in a slightly different way. They are trying to work only to the degree that it does not significantly interfere with their studies, because for them, education is the pathway to their career. They rely on community and government supports to facilitate achievement of their goals. This couple does not seek to abuse the system, and they struggle financially as they work toward their goals of qualifying for a professional career. They live in the basement of a family member's home and pay a low amount of rent. Oma is looking forward to a future, where she and Kevin depend less on public benefits and family support:

> Everybody…has a dream, you know, to have your own place; have your own
> food; be able to have money to get all that stuff. I'm going to college because I
> want to have my own stuff…. We just want to get out of this living situation that

we're living in now, especially with government assistance. We are really tired of depending on that.

Connection to college and peers. Participants seemed to highly value the relationship they had with their ALPHA advisor. The connection ALPHA students feel between themselves and their advisors was consistent across all interviews. There was an immense amount of trust and a sense that they were tackling their education as a team. In her interview, Oma, the teen-parent who had lost her own parents as a teenager said it particularly poignantly: "It's not like I just see her as an advisor. I see her as a family member. She's really close to me." Most participants mentioned their ability to contact their advisor and count on a quick response as a particular advantage of their relationship with their advisor.

Some participants expressed a need for more flexibility from their faculty and the institution as a whole in order to allow them to prevent their obstacles from becoming insurmountable. Others, like Antoinette, explained how she reaches out to her professors intentionally to build rapport, so that if something happens that prevents her from turning in an assignment, the professor would know that it was atypical of her.

Although they feel a strong connection to their advisor, many participants discussed an overall sense of feeling like an outsider and a need to connect with the others in the shared experience. Most students also mentioned the desire to be more involved in the college community, but were unable to prioritize the time to get involved and lacked awareness about any groups that might be appropriate for them.

Jennifer talked extensively about the desire to connect with peers. This desire even led her to drive around the region to take classes that would have more adult students, and she sought advice from staff to find places where she would find more adults with whom to connect. After the experience in which she found herself in class with her son's friends, she said it felt "awkward" and even with her husband's encouragement, she felt uncomfortable and "out of place," so she swapped the class for an online version. She shared the self-talk that often keeps her from feeling comfortable in class with traditional-aged students:

> There was going to be a group project to that class that I swapped out. I was thinking, "They're all probably sitting there thinking 'I hope I don't get the old lady….'" I think that it's generational; there's that gap…. He [the professor] was asking questions that first day, and I knew the answers. I knew exactly what he was hoping everybody would say. Nobody was raising a hand. I'm like, "I don't want to be that lady."

In follow up, I asked if she found it to be different in the classes she has taken that had more adult students, and she replied, "I had no problems speaking, even asking questions…it didn't bother me at all." Later, Jennifer specifically discussed the community that seems to exist for traditional-aged students. She felt like it was easier for them to forge connections due to a shared high school or participation in a college-sponsored organization.

Kevin described that he feels the college is "more catered to traditional students." He notes the clubs in which he cannot participate due his busy schedule. Sasha had

similar perspectives. She said she would love to see more activities. The efforts she has made to participate seemed to be dominated by people she saw as "kids." Antoinette also pointed out that she would like a greater sense of community, but added she would be open to more classes that enrolled adult students. Jennifer indicated she actively seeks classes that are likely to include more people from her age group.

Participants discussed the idea of clubs or student organizations, but they felt none of them really reflected them as a student body, and they did not have time to participate in those that were available. In her enrollment at various campuses, Jennifer explained that she saw only limited activities for adults, and when she mentioned this to her mentor, she was advised to start one, but shrugged it off, because she would soon graduate. Another participant, Ommohamed, seemed to rule out clubs or organizations as something exclusive to traditional-aged students: "I'm just more focused…. [They are] in other activities like sports or other stuff, while for me, it was all about academic experience."

Many participants mentioned the need to leave campus as quickly as possible after class due to their other responsibilities. Instead of initiating or participating in established campus groups, some participants discussed the value of the activities, albeit limited ones, that ALPHA sponsors. With social activities, career-centered activities, and child-raising activities, those who participated felt that ALPHA's events were personally valuable, but added that they still did not make lasting connections to other adult students. They also described the challenges of prioritizing these activities with other competing priorities.

Fostering a connection to the institution proved to be a strong theme across interviews. The sense that the advisor, their ally, understood their needs and was committed to their success contributed to their persistence. While this support was valuable, they were encouraged to identify other ways the college might address their needs through policy and practice.

Policies and Practices

With this research, I sought not only to learn more about the factors that affect students outside of the classroom; I wanted to better understand their perspective about the policies and procedures that affect their enrollment as low-income adult community college students. There were a few areas that multiple participants discussed. For example, the ability to take classes at a variety of times and locations was important. Specialized advising was also very important. Not only did students indicate a need for advising that included their unique backgrounds as was described above, there was also a need that one participant described for clarity on which coursework could be completed in order to gain acceptance through a competitive admission program. Participants also recommended clearer communication from the college as a need. Finally, as discussed previously, some participants expressed an interest in accessing childcare on campus. Each of these recommendations are discussed below.

Scheduling and course availability. Scheduling and availability of classes at varying times and in various formats was also a recurring theme across interviews. Oma said that while online courses are often available, students who do not do well with such a format find the situation to be a "roadblock" to finishing a degree. Jennifer explained

this in detail as she described her willingness to travel for better options and the ways in which she chooses which classes to take over different term lengths:

> I tried to take a variety, so for me, it really worked well. I could take like eight - week [classes]. If I was to get four classes, I was trying to do, if two of them are eight weeks, I space them out. Then if I had two that were, like, the full 12 or 16 weeks. It's like, I can't take all of them condensed like that; it's too much, but if I take one of those eight-week courses at a time, then I can do it. For me, it's better because you know like, "Okay, well this one's about to end and I'm just down to three," but having…the options because for me, if I had all four of them that were 12- or 16-week, I would feel like, "This is never going to end." And then when I tried to pick classes that I thought weren't, for me, going to be as difficult, I could do those in eight-week [format]. With the ones that I knew might be a struggle, I try to take those for the 12 weeks or the 16 weeks because I knew it was going to be difficult.

Personalized attention. Although this was discussed above in terms of how holistic advising affects participants' connection to the college, it is important to readdress this concept here in order emphasize the importance of dedicated advising as a practice within institutions. Low-income adult community college students need personalized attention.

Holistic advisors in ALPHA have robust knowledge across a variety of student services. They support students with academic advising, career or transfer planning, financial aid advising, access to social service and community benefits, as well as general

admissions and matriculation procedures. Students emphasized their confidence in their advisors and how they felt they provided customized information that led them to feel more confident. Other students focused on how they felt a sense of encouragement, but also a degree of accountability to stay on track.

Based on the data in this study, students seek and appreciate building rapport and having someone who knows their situations. Their needs related to transfer credit, PLA, foreign education, and transfer to nontraditional programs in universities were topics the specialist advisors in ALPHA managed on a regular basis. It was clear from the participants' perspectives that having a single point of contact to address their academic, financial aid, and enrollment questions with accurate information and an encouraging attitude made participants feel more capable and secure.

Syd describes a specific instance that would have led her to leave the college. Restricted enrollment policies for students who had not yet been accepted into her program of study made her feel as though she had no enrollment options. Her advisor carefully reviewed the curriculum and identified all of the applicable courses Syd could take while she was waiting for her application to her program of study to be reviewed. "I wouldn't have been able to figure that out," she said. Some of the courses could be taken prior to acceptance into the program, but only with instructor permission. Syd did not feel confident about how to contact them until her advisor provided information and encouragement. Later in the interview, she also indicated that had she attempted the courses she completed prior to her acceptance concurrently with those that had to be

taken after her acceptance, she believes she would have failed due to the immense workload. Instead, her advisor's advice put her on a path to success.

Oma explained that when she was advised in the campus advising center, before joining ALPHA, the advisor must not have understood what she was trying to accomplish and advised her incorrectly, which led her to enroll in the wrong courses. The next semester, because of that experience, she decided to advise herself and took more incorrect classes and was unsuccessful in at least one. Because of the transfer rules at the university she plans to attend, she now must retake the incorrect classes to qualify for guaranteed admission. Oma's advisor also showed her how she could benefit by taking those classes in a particular order. With the advice of her advisor, her education plan included enrollment in courses in a specific order to allow her to earn certificates while she pursued her degree. These stackable credentials have afforded her a better position at her part-time job. She describes her advisor in ALPHA as a "coach…teaching me."

Many of the participants told of or alluded to being the first in their families to attend college. Before joining ALPHA, many of the participants lacked information to make them feel more comfortable about the processes they undertook. Kevin explained how he appreciated the guidance in completing the college application and that he was intimidated by the financial aid process. He joined ALPHA with a SAP warning that he did not understand or know how to resolve. He felt that the level of uncertainty about the process could have held him back. "The smallest barrier will keep somebody from doing something. As far as that, that's just something that kept me away from school for a long time."

Participants valued the individualized support they received from their holistic advisors. Kevin provided a strong overview:

It's more of a personalized experience. They know what your end goal is. They know what your obstacles are right now. I think that's really important…. We're comfortable sharing anything with [advisor's name masked], because we know she'll pull through, as far as providing resources, a solution to a problem, or suggestions to things we might want to look at.

Clearer communication from the college. Antoinette spoke of her frustration with the grading system. Multiple times in the interview, she described how disappointed she was that many weeks into her classes, she was still failing. Because of the way points are assigned, she realizes that she needs a certain number of points in order to earn a particular final grade. This system of accrual makes her feel as though she is not progressing:

The points for the classes. I do not like it at all. We get 15 points total for your essay, your 200-, 300-word essay. It takes me sometimes four or five hours to do one little essay, and I only get 15 points for it. Right now, I still have an F. This is week 12 of 13 of class, and I still have an F. Why do I still have an F after 12 weeks of class? Because of the points.

It is clear that using a system in which students earn points toward their final grade instead of weighting different assignments has left Antoinette with a sense of failure, even as she is making the steady progress necessary to succeed in her classes. This is an area that could be addressed through clearer communication from faculty about

why accrual was selected as the grading system and the importance of completing work throughout the semester, regardless of the grading system.

Kevin spent a portion of his interview expressing his concerns about communication with students. He explained that as a student, he receives a significant amount of email, and it is often challenging to discern which messages are sent for informational purposes and which actually required action on his part. This can be particularly concerning when it comes to messages regarding his financial aid. He explains:

> I get emails all the time…for me as a student, I don't know if this is important or if it's just like a, "Hey, just a heads-up, we want you to know this." That sort of thing. Some of these emails – it's like, "Okay, you've got to do something. You really have to do this." There'll be emails where it's kind of like, "Just to let you know, there's an update on this and that." They're really not that important. As far as me distinguishing that, that's hard as well. I'm constantly with my mentor from the scholarship program, or [my success advisor], "What's this email? Is it important? Do you know if I've got to do something?"

Many college students may express a similar perspective, but the key here is that low-income community college students are managing a variety of other factors competing for their time, so it is critical that the purpose of the message be clearly stated. Later in the interview, Kevin agreed that using flags to categorize whether action is required on an email or whether it was informational would clarify which messages required action.

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Childcare on campus. As described above, childcare is an issue for many nontraditional students. Raising their children is understandably one of the most demanding priorities in the lives of student-parents. However, the participants in this study felt that the college did little to address the competing priorities of being a good student while also being a good parent. Many of the parents of older children described how their childrearing responsibilities had forced them to withdraw from classes in the past.

Parents of young children were more vocal about their current needs. When asked about how colleges could better serve adult students, Kevin and Sasha both pointed out the lack of a day care center on their campus. Sasha recognized the liability issues that could be associated with having on-campus childcare. She was quick to suggest having a formal day care provider, with students who are interested in early childhood development working alongside the professional. She suggested parents could sign a waiver indicating they understand that students would be providing care for their children.

Oma, too, expressed a desire to work in an on-campus childcare center, rather than having to work off-campus. Working on campus would provide relevant work experience while she pursued her studies. It would also help her to engage more with her college community while providing for her family. The enthusiasm of both student-parents and students studying early childhood development provides an opportunity for higher education administrators to better serve multiple groups of students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the qualitative data yielded from this study. I provided robust profiles summarizing the interviews with each participant. These interviews showed the perspective of the students and highlighted the elements of the holistic advising program in which they all participate that have a significant influence on their college success. After summarizing the interviews, I then discussed how those interviews led to the main themes that arose in this research. Based on the data in this study, the main elements of holistic advising that affect low-income adult community college students are balance, managing complexity, career focus, and connection to the college and peers.

Participants also indicated that there are policies and procedures that allow them to succeed in college. Adult students depend on multiple scheduling options. The ability to travel to various campuses, take classes online, and enroll in courses of varying lengths are assets that allow low-income adult community college students to thrive. Additionally, they need personalized attention. This was a theme that arose across all interviews. Next, participants indicated that they would benefit from clear communication from the college regarding grading policies and email. The final recommendation for better serving low-income adult community college students is to provide childcare on campus. This would allow more students the flexibility to spend time on campus and ease the burden of finding childcare outside of class time to take tests or get more involved with campus activities.

Chapter Five

In Chapter 2, I highlighted research that explains the current climate in community colleges. With consistent declines in state and federal funding (Helmer, 2013; Hunter & White, 2004; Jenkins, 2015; Quinterno, 2012; Wilson et al., 2015), high levels of competition from the for-profit sector (Arcand, 2015), and an increased demand for college education (Helmer, 2013; Jenkins, 2015), community colleges are faced with addressing populations from a variety of backgrounds and skill levels (Jenkins, 2015; Milheim & Bichsel, 2007).

In this chapter, I correlate the findings from this study to existing literature to demonstrate where this work fits within scholarship. I do this by recounting each of the themes that were explained in the previous chapter and addressing the connections between this work and the literature. I compare the findings of this work to those of Schroeder and Terras's (2015) research on holistic advising and discuss the implications of this work on practice. I conclude the chapter by describing the significance of this work, its limitations, and areas that should be explored in future research.

Balancing Priorities

The literature indicates that adult student populations are on the rise in institutions of higher education (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). The students come to college campuses with significantly more complex backgrounds than traditional students (Capps, 2012).

College personnel must adjust their approach to serve this population and address the challenges they face (Bergman et al., 2015; Capps, 2012; Noel-Levitz & CAEL, 2005).

Bergman et al. (2015) indicated that age alone was not a determining factor for completion of one's educational goal. Instead, factors such as professional obligations and parenting have a more significant effect on persistence among adult students. This was supported in this study. Multiple participants shared their experiences of juggling work and family responsibilities while attending college. Each participant confirmed that professional responsibilities and parenting have an adverse effect on the quantity of classes they can take.

Although professional responsibilities and parenting have a negative effect on persistence, students did indicate positive effects as well. Antoinette was able to apply skills and strategies she had learned in the workplace to her studies, which helped her to stay more organized. Oma explained that as she acquired new credentials, she was promoted in her job. Jennifer and Kevin reported that, as parents, they found they were more driven to set an example for their children. These positive effects of college attendance can mitigate some of the challenges faced by nontraditional community college students.

One factor that was identified in the literature and not demonstrated in the findings of this study was that part-time enrollment was correlated to lack of persistence (Bergman et al., 2015). Just one of the participants in this study, Jennifer, was enrolled full-time. It appears that participation in a holistic advising program may positively influence persistence. Participants described significant value in having an advisor who

kept them on track. In fact, all participants indicated that their advisor served as a source of encouragement or accountability. They all also reported that the advisor created an individualized education plan or prompted the student to make progress.

Arcand's (2015) research indicated that for-profit institutions successfully meet the needs of nontraditional students. They support balance of responsibilities, and address needs such as finding reliable childcare and accessing transportation. Participants in the current study repeatedly emphasized their appreciation for classes at various times and locations in differing formats and term lengths. Many of the participants referenced their ability to email their advisors and count on a quick, accurate response. This type of flexibility is important in managing the stress that adult students are likely to encounter, because it allows them to fit their studies more easily into their already busy lives.

Managing Complexity

Holistic advising was instrumental in the lives of the students in this study. Antoinette described how she leaned on her advisor when she felt like quitting:

She just calmed me down and made me feel like I wasn't alone in this. Whenever I send her an email or call her, she emails me right back or calls me. If I need to know something about FAFSA or my grades, she's right on it lickety-split. She sent me an email saying, "You need this, this, this class, this class," and I'm always referring back to it.

Adult students face high levels of stress in college. Managing professional, academic, and personal demands is stressful and this study supported research that suggested that the college environment is highly complex for these students who have so

many other commitments, because it is still largely designed for traditional-aged college students in terms of when full-time faculty members teach, student services are available, and academic resources that are available (Helmer, 2013; Kazis et al., 2007). Sasha explained that when she first joined ALPHA, her advisor came to her to help her complete paperwork. Later, she discussed how difficult it would be to get to campus during the hours that student services are available.

ALPHA advisors were also instrumental in managing complexity by informing participants about policies that could benefit them. Syd was also able to use the advice from her advisor to take advantage of a little-known policy that allowed her to avoid having poor grades from 20 years in the past affect her grade point average. Without this guidance, she might not have been allowed to apply for the competitive program she pursued. Similarly, Kevin took advantage of this policy by making his first three classes after joining ALPHA the same courses he had failed years before. His advisor told him about this policy, which allowed only his most recent attempts to calculate into his GPA.

Antoinette, too, has relied on her advisor for specific programmatic guidance. When her program was discontinued in 2014, she was informed that she would have to complete the program within three years. In order to finish on time, she and her advisor developed a customized plan that required Antoinette to take two classes each semester instead of one. During the semester she was interviewed, Antoinette explained that taking two classes while working full-time had proved to be too ambitious, leading her to reach out to her advisor for advice. Her advisor pointed out that she could withdraw from one class and still achieve her goal while also maintaining financial aid eligibility.

This advice, which extends beyond basic academic advising is especially important for low-income community college students. The participants in this study expressed significant obstacles that had to be overcome in order for them to receive aid. This observation was supported by Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016): "since navigating bureaucracies requires stamina and specialized knowledge, the students who may be most likely to respond to grant aid may be the least likely to actually receive it" (p. 1,767). The financial aid knowledge of ALPHA advisors appears to be equally as valuable as the academic program knowledge.

There was little mentioned in the interviews about the role that developmental education played in participants' college experiences. Sasha expressed her struggles with computer-based modules in her developmental math course, and Ommohamed and Ella discussed their English as a Second Language coursework, but no one reported anything to support Capps's (2012) finding related to the challenge of moving past developmental education.

It should be noted that out of eight participants, six placed into developmental coursework. These placements demanded English remediation for native speakers, English language acquisition for non-native speakers, and/or math remediation. One participant, Jennifer, had extensive coursework from other institutions, and she did not indicate whether she had needed developmental coursework prior to the college-level credits she transferred into the college. The participants' experiences with developmental education are noteworthy, because all have college-level coursework on their records,

suggesting that they were successful in overcoming the challenges presented by students who place into developmental education.

Career Focus

Bergman et al. (2015) and Hall (2015) suggested that many low-income adult students see themselves as workers who attend school rather than students who also work. In order to better understand the perspective of each participant, each was asked how they viewed themselves: a student who works or an employee who attends school. Out of eight participants, three were working full-time. Sasha and Ommohamed responded definitively that they saw themselves as workers who attend college. Antoinette explained that she saw herself as a student who works, but when pressed, she indicated that work did, in fact, take priority over her studies.

The other participants seemed less clear. This is likely due to the fact that they spend similar amounts of time on their studies as their work. Ella, Kevin, Jennifer and Oma worked part-time. Syd was the only participant who was not working and she attended college due to support from disability insurance, which allowed her to study.

The fact that participants who work full-time appeared more likely to report that they saw themselves as workers who go to school supports the notion that sacrifices would be made to academics rather than professional obligations. Kevin said as much in his interview. When he had worked full-time five years before, he would show up to class exhausted and unable to focus on his classes. He ended up failing all of his courses that semester. Antoinette said the same sort of thing when she clarified whether work or

school would get priority if she had to choose. She felt a responsibility to her professional peers and wanted to make sure they knew they could count on her.

Sasha appreciated the way advising extended beyond academics. She explained that career-focused information from her advisor made her feel like her advisor understood her needs: "They tell you about the workshops, the resume, you have your internship or the [job and internship database]. It's just a little bit more structured for adults and a little bit easier to follow one path." This information along with guidance about scheduling classes provided Sasha with a sense of security and gave her "more of a plan."

Connection to College and Peers

The connection that students feel to their ALPHA advisor is critically important, which is consistent with existing literature. Existing literature suggests that adult students are likely to face stress and anxiety when they start or return to college (Bland, 2003; Willans & Seary, 2011). In addition, they may find unexpected effects on their self-esteem (Milheim & Bichsel, 2007). This is particularly challenging for students who are not familiar with the college environment and lack a mentor, like a family member who has successfully completed college. Participants in the current study validated these findings as they described their personal experiences.

Capps's (2012) work emphasized the importance of connecting students to the college. She explained that while the primary reasons for leaving an institution originated outside the agency of the college, a close connection to college staff was valuable, because they influenced the students' decisions.

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In Chapter 2, I explained various forms of advising that have evolved in higher education. From prescriptive advising to developmental advising to intrusive/proactive advising, the trend has been to strengthen the relationship between advisors and students. Holistic advising takes these important advising strategies a step further and adds the consideration of nonacademic factors that affect students' experiences in college. This approach fosters a strong connection between the advisor and the student and establishes an environment where students feel more comfortable blurring the lines between their academic environment and their personal or professional environments.

As suggested in the last chapter, students in ALPHA appeared to have more confidence in their ALPHA advisor than they had in campus advisors. Some reported that they did not feel heard by campus staff or that they felt as though they were getting standard answers, rather than answers that addressed their unique circumstances. Oma described how the lack of understanding led her to take an entire semester of incorrect coursework, which caused her to lose confidence in the campus-based advisors and make errors advising herself, before she joined ALPHA.

Adult students seek to be seen as individuals and rely on informed advisors who provide recommendations based on their unique circumstances. Multiple participants in the current study indicated that their advisor had encouraged them and provided specific options that allowed them to stay motivated while progressing toward their goal. This supports Knowles's (1957) theory that educators should not tell adult students about what doors will open due to their education; instead they should unearth what the students seek liberation from. By connecting with students about how their education will facilitate

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their goals, educators provide motivation and context for the challenges they face along their educational pathway.

Many participants suggested a sense of having an ally due to their ALPHA advisor. They believed that their advisor was an informed representative of the college who would guide them through the unfamiliar college environment. This level of trust and confidence led students to share more information about their lives outside of the college and afforded the advisor an opportunity to provide options or recommendations that reflected the tenuous balance low-income adult community college students must strike. Oma and Kevin explained they kept their advisor informed of everything, so she could provide them informed suggestions while considering the challenges they faced. This balance of autonomy to make their own decision, with confidence that they were doing so with good information, comes from the close relationship and trust the participants had with their advisors. Participants clearly felt trust in the advising they received and considered it a necessary part of their college experience.

Oma's negative experience with another advisor led her to value the positive experience she had with her ALPHA advisor. Similarly, Jennifer indicated that before ALPHA, she had never had anyone at her other colleges seem so interested in helping her to complete her goal. Syd explained that without her ALPHA advisor, she would not have been able to navigate successful admission to a competitive program and likely would have dropped out due to poor advising she had received about withdrawing from a class. Sasha valued the specific recommendations about summer enrollment. Overall, every participant in this study spoke highly of the value of their holistic advisor. When pressed,

only Ommohamed said she would have succeeded academically without the continued support of ALPHA. She explained that, because she had successfully completed college in her home country, she had confidence in her ability to succeed here. She was only held back by her uncertainty about how to clarify her education level. That said, she also had never removed herself from ALPHA.

Arcand's (2015) work indicated that adult students did not have time to learn about what the campus has to offer. However, the current study described the opposite for students who participate in ALPHA. Syd explained that through communication from her advisor, she felt significantly more informed about available services and academic advising issues. She was proud to share the information with her classmates. Sasha suggested something similar about the different types of events she heard about due to the close relationship she had with her advisor.

Some participants also expressed a desire to connect with students who were closer in age. Capps's (2012) research had suggested learning communities for developmental education courses, and could provide an approach that allows adult students to connect with other adults in the classroom. This would also address the challenge of trying to connect adults who can only stay on campus for the duration of their classes.

Holistic Advising

Schroeder and Terras's (2015) work on holistic advising was the sole source I was able to find in the literature on the topic. As I mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, their definition of holistic advising was limited to the academic environment and was applied

to graduate students. Participants in the current study reflected the broader definition I introduced earlier. The advising experience described by participants extended to a broader context in which the students' extracurricular environments play a role in advising.

Schroeder and Terras established five themes present in good advising, which they categorized as: "programmatic guidance, trust, individual, important, and immediate/electronic communication" (p. 46). These elements were brought up as characteristics of ALPHA by participants in the current study across all interviews. The results support the notion that these factors are present in ALPHA and may suggest that Schroeder and Terras's tenets of good advising could be extended to include low-income adult community college students in addition to the graduate student population in their work. Below, I have used each of Schroeder and Terras's elements of good advising to demonstrate how they are demonstrated in this current study's findings to support the theme related to connection to college and peers.

Programmatic guidance. Programmatic guidance is the process of directing students to take the proper class and understanding key policies or required paperwork. This support in course selection and programmatic guidance demands a significant amount of knowledge from the advisor (Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

Programmatic guidance was identified as an important factor in many of the interviews. Syd, the participant who joined ALPHA when she was applying to a competitive admissions program, spoke extensively about how she felt the guidance she received from her advisor gave her an edge when it came to completing coursework that

was permitted before acceptance to the program. She explained that with her advisor's direction, she was able to complete coursework that she otherwise would have been expected to complete along with the courses that had restricted enrollment. They were difficult classes, and she said she never would have been able to complete them concurrently.

   Trust. Schroeder and Terras (2015) suggested that the "students' ability to trust the process of advising through the role, and the relationship with, their advisor" (p. 45) was a tenet of good advising. Satisfaction in the advising experience was directly related to their confidence in the process and the advisor.

   Students in the current study had a significant amount of trust in their advisors. Only Ella actually used the word "trust," and she made it clear that the relationships that she had forged with ALPHA's advising staff were important. She depended on the advisors to help her determine which academic path made the most sense. Her faith in the accuracy and responsiveness of her advisors also made her feel more comfortable.

   Similarly, Syd had an experience that caused her to lose faith in the campus-based advisors. When she had a conflict with one of her professors, she stopped into the advising office and asked if she should proceed with withdrawing from the class. Without considering the financial aid implications, the campus-based advisor recommended withdrawal, and it caused Syd to fail SAP. In retrospect, she realized she should have contacted her ALPHA advisor, and this experience led her to gain even more trust in her advisor. Because she failed SAP that semester, she and her ALPHA advisor devised a

plan and worked together to submit the proper paperwork to have a financial aid appeal approved, so she could continue taking classes.

Individual. The third theme Schroeder and Terras (2015) identified was personalized advising. Schroeder and Terras explained that the personal relationship between the advisor and advisee fosters a "collaborative approach" (p. 47) in creating an individualized education plan with specific information like courses and timelines. Much like was described in the section on trust, Schroeder and Terras caution that adult students do not want to feel that their situation is like everyone else's, and they want personalized attention.

In the previous chapter, the student profiles showed the various ages, work experiences, familial responsibilities, and experiences at the college. I explained the complexity in many adult students' education records. Some had foreign education experiences. Another had multiple schools from which to transfer credit. Still others had professional experience that could articulate into college credit through the development of a portfolio. Some had poor academic records from their current institutions that dated back as far as 30 years in the past. With such varied backgrounds and academic experiences, a personal relationship between advisors and students provides individualized responses to fulfill the students' goals.

When Jennifer, the participant who had transcripts from multiple colleges, was asked about what could have been done to facilitate progression through her academic program, she said: "I think having that individualized advisor because, I mean, really that's I think what has prevented me from finishing my degree—is things that would

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happen in life and not having, like, people who would work for you to keep you on track."

Individualized advising made a difference for Oma as well.

With the recommendations of her advisor, she was able to take her classes in an order that allowed her to complete certificates while she worked toward her degree. These certificates bolstered her resume, and she earned promotions at work.

Important. The fourth theme in Schroeder and Terras's (2015) work was the importance of advising. Both the student and the advisor must see advising as an important element of the educational experience. If either the student or advisor dismisses the value of good advising, students believed it could lead to noncompletion.

In their work, Schroeder and Terras (2015) suggested that quality advisors possessed a "passion to advise adult students and share a vested interest and belief in practice" (p. 48). Participants in the current study suggested the same. Antoinette said that regardless of whether her advisor worked on a campus or in a holistic advising program, she believes she would foster the same connection with her students, because that is "her disposition." Antoinette explained that while she underwent two different surgeries, her advisor checked in with her and that she almost feels like it is a race at the end of the semester as to whether her advisor will reach out to her regarding final grades before she can reach out to her advisor. Similarly, Syd said her advisor "saved her" when she would have otherwise given up hope.

Participants in the current study place a high level of value on the role of the advisor in their success in higher education. They see their advisors as committed to their

success and highly knowledgeable about their programs of study, transfer opportunities, and financial aid. This reciprocal value relationship of advising promotes greater rapport and leads to engagement between the student and advisor.

Immediate/electronic communication. The final tenet of good advising in Schroeder and Terras's (2015) work suggested that accessibility of the advisor to the student is a critical element in an advising relationship. According to Schroeder and Terras, the advent of email and texting has brought higher education to more consumers. It has also changed students' expectations regarding the means by which and the speed at which their advisors will communicate with them. More specifically, their work indicated that adult students prefer email as the primary method of communication and that they expect a response from their advisor within 24-48 hours.

The current study supported these findings. All except one participant spoke of how they valued the responsiveness of their advisor. As discussed above, Kevin specifically said that he often will email his advisor at night, when he is doing his homework, and will often have a response by the next morning when he is getting up for the day. Sasha shared a slightly different perspective. The responsiveness of her advisor eased much of her stress related to uncertainty. She admitted that she would find herself nervous and the fact that she could count on a response within a day or two from her advisor to address her concerns provided great relief.

Syd was particularly impressed at how dependable her advisor was in light of the demands on her advisor's time. She said, "I don't know how she does it. I know she has a lot of students that she's guiding. I'm just like - she returns my emails like this [snapping

her fingers], she returns my calls like that [snapping her fingers]." She went on to say that if more people knew about how responsive advisors in ALPHA are, she would expect the demand for the program would be higher.

Discussion

The significance of this study is that it explained more fully the tenuous balance struck by many low-income adult community college students as they manage competing priorities. Not only did this study provide more in-depth information about the specific experiences of this student population, it also built upon the work of Schroeder and Terras (2015) to extend their findings beyond graduate students to low-income adult community college students.

National Public Radio recently reported on a phenomenon it referred to as the "Scarcity Trap" (Boyle, 2017). The report posited that when one is missing something needed to survive, one begins to focus exclusively on the scarcity and emphasizes the most immediate means of achieving its end. The mind shuts out other parts of the individual's life, forcing him or her to make decisions that may not be beneficial in the long run. In fact, in a period of scarcity, cognitive ability decreases. In a more specific example, poverty forces people to focus only on their immediate needs to make ends meet. Focus turns to preventing further deterioration, but this may negatively affect other important factors, such as maintaining employment or focusing on successful completion of coursework in college.

This phenomenon relates to the current study because anticipating and responding to the needs of low-income students in a holistic way may serve to reduce the impact of

any potential scarcity they may encounter. This demonstrates the value of the current

research to fields beyond higher education. Any disadvantaged population may benefit

from a more holistic approach. This research can benefit those who work in social

services, the nonprofit sector, or those who work exclusively with academically

vulnerable populations, such as individuals with disabilities or military veterans. In this

section, I use the findings to offer implications for practice and further research based on

this study.

Implications for practice. This work produced four main themes related to the

experience of low-income adult community college students: balancing priorities,

managing complexity, career focus, and connection to college and peers. Each theme is

addressed below with specific recommendations for practitioners. I then discuss the

policies and procedures that participants in this study indicated have the greatest effect on

their student experience.

Balancing priorities. This research highlighted the strong rapport between

ALPHA's holistic advisors and their students. This relationship facilitates open dialogue

about existing challenges and planning for potential challenges that may arise without

consideration for whether those obstacles are likely to occur on campus. Thus, the first

recommendation for practice is to implement holistic advising programs for vulnerable

populations in community colleges. The students in this study described a strong

relationship between involvement in ALPHA and their ability to persist in college due to

the one-stop approach for academic advising, financial aid advising, and student services

and the genuine interest they receive from their advisors about nonacademic issues that

might affect their college success. Students with an informed ally can talk through competing priorities to determine the best course of action for fulfilling their goals.

Due to this population's needs, efforts should include addressing access to community and social service benefits that provide support to students. The holistic advising approach of connecting students concurrently with college and community resources to promote success has proven highly effective in yielding excellent outcomes for adult students (Helmer, 2013). It capitalizes on the strengths of each partner to benefit the adult college student. Many of the interviewees indicated a need for financial coaching, concerns about insecure housing, and major medical events that introduced volatility in their lives. Kevin specifically described a need for information about available resources. He suggested a presentation about options that students might use in order to stabilize their living situations. Two participants expressed significant concerns about the amount of time they spent trying to secure benefits and that they felt poorly informed when benefits ceased. Based on these experiences, practitioners need to carefully consider developing a closer connection between the community college and social service agencies.

Another area of concern related to balance was the issue of childcare. Multiple participants said raising children had previously affected their enrollment or was contributing to the challenges they faced at the time of this study. The lack of childcare resources on campus or close connections with community childcare options force students to make difficult decisions about their academics. For example, Sasha said she felt no choice but to bring her daughter to the testing center. The staff accommodated her,

but informed her that having her daughter on site was not permitted. Both Antoinette and Jennifer indicated that raising children while attending college had forced them to leave college until their children had grown.

Managing complexity. Participants in this study included a small part of the adult community college student population, yet they represented many of the unique experiences of adult students. Some had poor enrollment histories from years in the past. One had coursework from numerous American institutions. Others had foreign education. Still others sought in-depth career advisement and prior learning assessment (PLA). Nearly all needed developmental education. Most had not seen college as a realistic option when they were in high school. Only one, Jennifer, could enroll full-time and that was because she had left her full-time job to focus on college.

These complex backgrounds demand specialized attention. Practitioners must be proactive about asking questions that address some of these situations. Adult students benefit from having a single point of contact to offer guidance related to academics, financial aid, and career. However, most institutions are set up with each of these areas in a different location. Based on the data, a more holistic approach, where the student has a single point of contact who can address multiple areas, has significant benefits to the student. This is not to suggest that the advisors would have mastery of all content areas, but they could have a strong foundation with key contacts in each department to address unusual circumstances rather than leaving students who have limited time available on campus to travel from office to office.

Career focus. As mentioned in the last chapter, the career theme of this research has two elements. First, nearly all of the low-income community college students who participated in this study were also working while attending college. This forced multiple stressors on their time, limited their rates of enrollment, and limited engagement with the college and fellow students.

Giancola et al. (2009) conducted a study related to stress and its influence on well-being among adult students. Stressors included the following categories: work demands, personal demands, school demands, family–school conflict, school–family conflict, work–school conflict, and school–work conflict. Their study concluded that work stress caused the most drastic effect on well-being, likely because the adults had the least influence over that stressor as compared to school and family stressors. Higher education administrators should anticipate this stress for working adults and provide resources to inform students about effective strategies for addressing these pressures. In addition, professors can employ work-based assignments to align students' studies to their work.

The findings in this study clearly support the need for evening and weekend classes to serve working students. Participants also expressed appreciation for online learning options. However, there was evidence that more could be done to support working students. Sasha shared a concern about the need to travel to the campus hosting a class in order to take a computer-based exam. This seems to be a relatively easy adjustment to allow students the flexibility to complete computer-based exams at the

campus most convenient to them rather than offering such testing only at the campus that sponsored the class.

Similarly, students expressed concerns about reaching campus-based staff due to limited times they were available. They said having the option to work via email with their ALPHA advisor reduced the need to travel to campus and meet with staff during inconvenient times. As such, institutions should evaluate whether all services that currently demand an in-office visit actually need to be conducted in person. One participant in this research indicated she had taken a picture on her phone of a form she received and was able to get the information she needed from her ALPHA advisor through a couple of quick email exchanges, rather than travelling to campus for guidance. Finding new ways to use technology in order to make existing processes more efficient for students can allow more students to successfully fit college into their already demanding lives.

Because many students are building on existing careers, PLA is a benefit that some adult students should have available. Whether through competency-based exams, recognition of professional development, or portfolio development, there was interest in more PLA options. Two participants expressed interest in applying the knowledge they had developed in the workplace to try to earn college credit, but they lacked information about how the process worked. One student had pursued the option and had a very positive experience, but still seemed unclear about whether she could use PLA to reduce the number of hours remaining in her major requirements. Relatedly, practitioners must

make the assessment options affordable, so that students who could most benefit are able to take advantage of the option.

The second connection to career was that many of the participants in this study emphasized the importance of career in their decision to return to college. Whether they looked to move up in the field in which they already worked, or whether they sought to transition to a new career field, education was the missing link for mobility. Data in this research also indicated that one participant was experiencing job promotions due to the credentials she earned while working toward her associate degree. As such, practitioners should consider carefully whether there are industry-recognized credentials that they can recommend as students progress toward completion of their degrees.

Low-income adult community college students place a high value on career as an influence on their college experience. As such, colleges need to make college accessible for working adults and provide opportunities to earn milestones as they progress. This includes a need to identify career experiences and internships that can be accomplished by working adults. Highlighting the correlations between learning and working will emphasize the connections between these competing priorities.

Connection to college and peers. The need for students to connect to their institution was first presented in the literature (Tinto, 1998) and confirmed through this research. Students who are connected to their college are far more likely to succeed (Bergman et al., 2015; Drake, 2011; Glennen, 1976; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Miller, 2012; Thomas & Minton, 2004). Many participants in the current study said they relied on their

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advisor as the primary connection to the college, which was consistent with Hunter and White's (2004) work.

Although they feel connected to their advisors, many participants expressed an interest in developing relationships with other adult learners. This was demonstrated by enrolling in classes during evening hours or on the weekend. Many either felt they had stronger relationships with faculty or indicated they related better to faculty than their younger student peers. Some expressed interest in participating in groups or clubs but, just as was found in Capps's (2012) work, felt the options either did not reflect their interests and needs or they expressed that they did not have enough time to engage on campus.

In light of the literature that indicates that those who are more connected are more likely to succeed and that people are more likely to earn the levels of education of those with whom they associate (Bergman et al., 2015), there is significant value in connecting adult students with each other and with mentors who have higher levels of education. As a result, the next recommendation for practice is to develop more online engagement opportunities for adult students to connect with each other. Because many students already use Facebook and Blackboard, development of a social group for students via these platforms could prove to effectively engage students and help them to connect with each other.

Based on participant interviews, face-to-face engagement options are more challenging. However, if colleges can offer programming that is valuable, includes options for the children of adult students, and is available at times that working adults are

available, these opportunities could be successful. It is important, however, to remember that this population does not spend much time on campus beyond their class times, so it is equally important to consider effective tools to inform students about these opportunities.

Policies and practices. Although various policies and procedures have been suggested throughout this work, I will now share the specific suggestions that participants in the study made regarding ways they could thrive in college. Low-income adult community college students need guided support. In ALPHA, this began with their first contact with the college. Participants attended a workshop where they received assistance completing their college application and FAFSA, which limited room for error. Students then attended an adult student orientation where they learned about important rules, resources, and strategies for success.

Students in ALPHA relied on having a single point of contact, which demanded that staff have familiarity with resources that may extend beyond typical advisement tools. This specialized content included PLA, social service benefits, financial aid, career advisement, and internships. They must be prepared to answer questions about transferring into the college and transferring to senior institutions. They also should be knowledgeable about opportunities, if there are any, to correct students' academic records after a lapse in enrollment. The advisors need to have caseloads that are small enough to allow them to build a relationship with each student, so that students feel comfortable sharing noncurricular factors that may affect their enrollment.

The participants in this study suggested that one of the key factors in their ability to continue enrollment was having an advisor who knew the specific details of their

situations. Because there are so many factors to consider with adult students, advisors should be knowledgeable, responsive, and caring. They must work with students to prepare individualized education plans, customized to the students' major, rate of attendance, opportunities for PLA, and ability to pay.

At the institutional level, there are also factors that contributed to the student experience. A variety of course offerings at varying times and at various locations allowed students to find classes at times that could work for them. Although some participants wished to see even more availability, most expressed appreciation for the available options. Classes offered online, in the evening, on weekends, and at various durations contributed to the ability of students to make progress toward their educational goals.

Students mentioned the importance of faculty flexibility. Whether situations arose that demanded more time due to the illness of a child or work demands, many of these adult students expressed that they needed flexibility that younger students may not need. They also seemed interested in correlating some of their classroom assignments into the workplace to make the work in the classroom more relevant to their professional lives.

One final recommendation for practitioners is to evaluate a system for clearer communications with students. With the limited time adult students have to focus on college, it is challenging to evaluate each email for importance. An email classification system could be employed to let students know when action is required.

Opportunities for future research. Prior research has indicated that investment in low-income adult community college students has significant effects on society. As

Jenkins's (2015) work suggested, investing in this population provides increased tax revenue to communities. This influx of money allows for more low-income families to access opportunities for developing financial security (Carnevale et al., 2010). Oma's interview specifically illustrated how she has experienced wage gains for completing credentials as she works toward her associate's degree. Although this study did not specifically address career pathways, future areas of research could include the degree of financial security obtained through credential completion in various fields. In other words, what wage gains occur as students progress toward completion of degrees in fields such as education or information technology? Fields with stackable credentials along a career pathway provide rich opportunities for populations that historically move in and out of the educational system before degree completion.

Similarly, another area of study would be related to the actual return on investment for supporting students through completion of their education. ALPHA used a ratio of 125-150:1 advisor. With the funding that came to the institution via Pell dollars from the students—who by the accounts of participants in the current study, would not have otherwise persisted in college—the salaries of the advisors were covered. Thus, it appears that implementing a holistic advising program is cost neutral for the college. However, when incorporating the societal benefits, the case for implementing holistic advising programs for vulnerable adult students is clear.

This is an area of future study that is of particular interest to the researcher, because after the research for this project was completed, the college where the case study occurred stopped accepting students into ALPHA. Funds were redirected during a

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budget shortfall due to concerns about sustainability after a grant that had been used to fund some staff members ended. ALPHA was moved to a different department within the college, and its mission was changed from direct support of students through case management to development of career pathways that included credit and noncredit programs with stackable credentials. These pathways emphasize connection to employers through industry-recognized credentials, internships, and easy movement in and out of the institution as students develop new skills to apply in the workforce.

Career pathway development, too, supports adult students, but in light of the strong data included in this study related to students' beliefs that they could not succeed without the support of their holistic advisors, this is a population that deserves direct support. Thus, additional research should be considered to determine the societal and economic advantages of supporting this population through holistic advising. It should be noted that all current students in ALPHA were to be served via case management indefinitely, so there are no data indicating attrition due to the dissolution of the case-management approach.

Conclusion

As explained in Chapter 2, there is an education shortfall looming in the United States' economy (Bergman et al., 2015; Carnevale et al., 2010; Quinterno, 2012). By 2018, the United States will not have enough skilled individuals to meet market demands (Carnevale et al., 2010). In order to meet this demand, educators and policymakers need to create pathways for success for student populations who have struggled in higher education.

This study focused on the experiences of low-income adult community college students who are beating the odds. Although many of the participants might not have otherwise succeeded, with the support of the holistic advising program in which they participate, they are steadily making progress toward their academic and professional goals. This population may help to address the skills gap that exists in the market and now is the time to employ strategies across institutions to ensure more students successfully graduate. Holistic advising programs are not the most affordable option available, but the data in this project demonstrate why they work for the students who participated. Knowing that the college community cares about their success and is eager to help them achieve their goals makes low-income adult community college students motivated to overcome the obstacles they face. As Jennifer said, "They're in it with you…. He [my advisor] really wanted me to succeed. That's great."

Appendix A

IRB Exemption Letter

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY | **Office of Research Integrity and Assurance**

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: February 22, 2016

TO: L. Earle Reybold, PhD
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [722030-3] The Role of Wrap-Around Services on Adult Student Success in
                         Community Colleges

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: February 22, 2016

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Office of
Research Integrity & Assurance (ORIA) has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW
according to federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be submitted to the ORIA prior to
initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Karen Motsinger at 703-993-4208 or kmotsing@gmu.edu.
Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason
University IRB's records.

Generated on IRBNet

Appendix B

Recruitment Email

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY | College of Education and Human Development
4400 University Drive, MS 4B3, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
E-mail: chubbar2@masonlive.gmu.edu

[DATE]

Dear [   ],

My name is Christina Hubbard and I am student at George Mason University. My name may also be familiar to many of you, because I also work as the [   ] program at [   ], I am leading a project to study the impact of wrap around supports on adult community college students. This data will be used in the future to highlight ways that community colleges can better serve their student populations by connecting students to services that will help them to succeed in college. Our goal is better understand the student experience for those students that have accessed resources available within the college as well as those that are outside the college, but contribute to more financial security while students complete their educational goals. This research has been reviewed by both George Mason University and [   ]'s institutional review boards and participants' confidentiality will be protected.

We are requesting your participation to contribute to the field of research on adult student success in community colleges. The first phase will consist of a brief screening survey. For those respondents that meet the criteria for this study, participation will consist of no more than two interviews lasting around one hour. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. After transcription of your recorded responses, you will be provided an opportunity to review the responses recorded as your own to verify they accurately reflect your thoughts. Additionally, with your permission, the researcher will access your Academic Advising Report from [   ] as a source of data in the research. This report contains information including your GPA, course history, student ID number, program(s) of study, placement test results, and remaining requirements. Participation in this research is completely optional and you may choose to opt out of any part of this research at any time without penalty or negative consequence. Though your full participation is appreciated, participants may elect not to answer any and all questions asked by the researcher.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email and I will follow up with you within one week to complete a survey that will help me to determine if you are a good fit for this study. Thank you for your assistance and please contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Christina Hubbard
[   ].gmu.edu

Appendix C

Recruitment Survey

Student Survey to be sent via email to elicit volunteers:

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

Summary: This survey was designed to screen prospective participants in the current study focused on The Role of Wrap-Around Supports on Adult Student Success in Community Colleges. Participation in this research is completely optional and you may choose to opt out of any part of this research at any time without penalty or negative consequence. Additionally, though your full participation is appreciated, participants may elect not to answer any and all questions asked by the researcher.

1. How long have you been in the ███████████ program? _____
2. How many credits have you completed toward your degree? _____
3. Do you receive any public benefits such as SNAP, TANF, or SSI? _____
4. Have you used any benefits from community organizations to help you manage your personal responsibilities while attending college (examples include: after school programs, financial literacy programs, affordable housing access, healthy living coaching)? If so, which programs? _____
_____
5. Do you have children? If so, ages? _____
6. Would you be willing to participate in a research study designed to better understand how external supports help adult community college students? This study will demand an interview as well as possible follow up interviews and you'll be invited to review your transcribed responses for accuracy. Participation in this research is completely optional and you may choose to opt out of any part of this research at any time without penalty or negative consequence. Additionally, though your full participation is appreciated, participants may elect not to answer any and all questions asked by the researcher. Please note that the researcher will request access to your Academic Advising Report from ████████ as a source of data in the research. This report contains information including GPA, course history, student ID number, program(s) of study, placement test results, and remaining requirements.

_____

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Interview protocol　　　　**Date:**　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Time:**

Participant pseudonym:

Description to be read aloud to participants: This research study will explore the role of wrap around services (such as financial aid advising and connection to community supports) in contributing to the success of students in the ▮▮▮▮▮ program. Emphasis will be placed on explaining procedures or policy that impact ▮ students as well as documenting strategies that are employed to help students continue advancing toward credential completion. The researcher seeks to explain what makes ▮ students successful in order to help other practitioners better assess strategies that can serve adult students pursuing higher education. Participation in this research is completely optional and you may choose to opt out of any part of this research at any time without penalty or negative consequence. Additionally, though your full participation is appreciated, participants may elect not to answer any and all questions asked by the researcher. Answers will be recorded as well as handwritten notes transcribed. After transcription, you will be provided an opportunity to review the responses recorded as your own to verify they accurately reflect your thoughts.

1. How long have you been in the ▮▮▮▮▮ program?
2. How many credits have you completed toward your degree?
3. Do you receive any public benefits such as SNAP, TANF, or SSI?
4. Have you used any benefits from community organizations to help you manage your personal responsibilities while attending college (examples include: after school programs, financial literacy programs, affordable housing access, healthy living coaching)? If so, which programs?
5. Do you have children? If so, ages?
6. Do you consider yourself to be an employee who attends school, or a student who works?
7. Tell me about why you decided to attend college most recently.
8. How has being a part of the ▮▮▮▮▮ program contributed to your experience at the college?
9. Describe any rules at the college that have made it more difficult or easier for you to complete your studies? (Clarifiers if the answers seem off track: These rules might be related restrictions about when students can enroll, how long classes last, availability of quality online classes, the ability to convert existing knowledge into college credit, etc.)
10. How has your advisor helped you to progress in your studies any faster than you would have if you had pursued your studies on your own? (use similar clarifiers as above).
11. Please describe anything the college could do to make it easier for older adult students to progress through their programs of study?
12. From your perspective, what is different about attending college as an older adult, versus attending right out of high school? How does the college make this experience easier or more difficult?
13. With an "X", indicate how you would describe where you are on the continuum of thriving and surviving as you navigate higher education while balancing your professional and personal demands.
   Thriving _____ Surviving
14. This concludes my prepared questions. What do you think is the best next question to ask you?

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Biography

Christina Hubbard graduated from Mexico High School, Mexico, New York, in 1998. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from University of Maryland, University College in 2004. She went on to earn her Master of Education in Student Affairs from Regent University in 2008 and a Certificate in College Counseling from University of California, Los Angeles in 2009.

Hubbard began her career at University of Maryland, University College as a field representative in Belgium in 2000. She then began an education consulting company and contracted her services to the Department of the Air Force from 2002-2009. In 2009, she began working for Northern Virginia Community College.