2017

Nontraditional online student perceptions of student access conditions

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NONTRADITIONAL ONLINE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SUCCESS CONDITIONS

A dissertation submitted in satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

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June, 2017

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This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Education

Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, CA
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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership, May 2017

University of Scranton, Scranton, PA
Master of Science in Secondary School Administration, 2001
Master of Science in Secondary School Counseling, 1996

State University of New York College at Brockport, Brockport, NY
Bachelor of Science in Psychology, Double Minor in Criminal Justice and French

Experience

Assistant Director, Enrollment Services October 2013-present
New York University Silver School of Social Work, New York, NY

- Manage the master schedule of classes offered for undergraduate, masters' and doctoral students offered online, on campus, regional and global sites in collaboration with department chairs and deans
- Develop strategic plan and annual goals for registration and financial aid areas
- Supervise management of annual financial aid budget totaling $10 million for scholarship programs
- Nominated to be the single representative from the Administrative Management Council on the President's Affordability Steering Committee; school representative for Veterans' Committee; school representation for University Commencement committee
- Serve on University-wide Registration committee to develop and improve policies and procedures related to developing consistent registration and enrollment services at the University
- Administer daily office operations, supervise administrative assistants, graduate assistant, and work study students to provide exceptional front line customer service to students, faculty and staff; exercise authority and make effective recommendations for hiring, promotions, salary adjustments

Assistant Dean of Student Services May 2012-March 2013
College of Westchester, White Plains, NY

- Realized continuous quality improvements and student success initiatives for Online Division, restructured online orientation to reflect current research
- Managed success coaching program and staff serving online, evening, weekend, and adult students to enhance college wide retention efforts
- Led the Testing Center staff, responsible for placement assessments and compliance with state immunization records

- Supervised the New Student Financial Assistance Office and implemented improved policies

Assistant Director, Student Financial Services June 2009-May 2012
New York University College of Dentistry, New York, NY

- Led daily operations and developed strategic, long-range, and multi-departmental goals with Assistant Dean of Student Affairs
- Developed, implemented and maintained comprehensive financial aid programs through Federal, State, institutional and private sources

Manager, Financial Aid May 2006-June 2009 and Financial Aid Counselor, August 2004-May 2006 Professional Schools, New York University, New York, NY

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- Acted as liaison with Central Office and professional schools to ensure compliance among all offices
- Overhauled University policy involving highly auditable and time sensitive return of funds project
- Filled in for Director of Financial Aid at monthly Registrar meetings
- Conducted both small group and large auditorium workshops at open house and University Day events

Teaching Experience

New York University, Silver School of Social Work, New York, NY

- Management and Organizational Practice for 21st Century Social Work, Masters level, Fall 2016

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Conference Presentations

ICEEEL 2017: International Conference on e-Education and e-Learning. April 2017. Presented on Nontraditional Online Student Perspectives of Student Success Conditions

NASPA 2017 National Conference, March 2017. Presented on Nontraditional Online Student Perceptions of Student Success Conditions

NASPA Assessment and Persistence Conference, June 2016. Presented dissertation on Nontraditional Online Student Perspectives of Student Success Conditions

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines nontraditional online students' perceptions of Tinto's four student success conditions: expectations, support, assessment, and engagement. Expectations include those of the student, the faculty and the institution. Support includes academic, social, and financial support. Providing early and meaningful assessment and feedback to students is crucial during their educational career. The fourth success condition in Tinto's model includes the involvement or engagement of students with their peers (and faculty) in both an academic and social contexts. Nontraditional student perceptions of each of these institutional conditions of success was uncovered through demographic survey, interviews, syllabi and website artifacts. This qualitative study provided a rich, detailed description of the lived experience of the nontraditional online student to add to the paucity of research on this understudied population. The three main themes emerged from the data: (a) nontraditional students identified in an asynchronous environment did not find the success conditions to be consistently present and reported that they would have benefitted from them if they had existed both academically and socially; (b) nontraditional students identified key elements for success, which included flexibility in their schedule and the opportunity to receive a degree from a reputable institution that would lead to career enhancement; (c) students reported developing a strong, positive academic relationship with their advisor. The advisor served as a substitute for faculty-student relationships and was the primary role for providing academic, social and financial support.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Despite the unprecedented growth of online education, a paucity of research has yet explored the conditions that lead to success in this population. While the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that college enrollment will increase 15% by 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013), enrollment in traditional, residential higher education programs grew at a more modest annual rate. In the time period from 2002 to 2011, traditional, residential undergraduate enrollment increased by only 2.6% (Allen & Seaman, 2013). During that same time period, online education enrollment of students taking at least one online course increased by a rate of 17.3 % (Allen & Seaman, 2013), much higher than overall projected enrollment figures.

Many factors contribute to the increase in online enrollment. Convenience and flexibility are some of the main factors. Online education provides more flexible scheduling for the students. Online course work also eliminates the inconvenience of commuting and transportation costs associated with attending a physical college campus. Another factor that would have inhibited online education many years ago, but is no longer so, is technology. Many current incoming student populations either grew up with computers in their households or have been using them at home and/or at work and are therefore more comfortable with the format of a distance-learning environment.

Presently, the majority of the college population is not made up of traditional, residential students aged 18 to 24. Vincent Tinto (2012) reports that almost 75% of the college population is now comprised of nontraditional students, aged 25 and older. Many working adults are attending college online for the first time or returning to college for additional education or career retraining (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007).

Community colleges are an increasing option and now enroll almost half of all undergraduate students in the country (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.-a). Whether online or at a physical campus, college and universities need to face the new reality that their student body may not be wishing to attend college in a traditional format, but instead may choose not to live on campus, take classes part time, and may be working while attending college (Tinto, 2012).

In consideration of the different life challenges nontraditional students face, postsecondary institutions need to adapt their practices in order to be ready to retain the nontraditional students through to degree completion. To raise graduation rates, colleges need to provide services that support students' online education. Support services can help a student achieve personal and academic success in the classroom. Tinto (2012) stresses that institutions have largely ignored the classroom, which is the one place where students interact with each other and faculty while also engaging in learning activities. In a virtual environment, such as online education, it can be more challenging to build an environment for success, but the theories and practice remain constant. Each successful class takes the student another small step towards overall student success and an ultimate goal of degree completion.

In addition to Tinto's (2012) focus on academic success in the classroom, Tinto has conducted and published extensive research on student retention for over 40 years. In his book, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, he examines the past findings on student success and posits what the research has reported as *success conditions*. His retention research suggests four general conditions that need to be present for student success: expectations, support, assessment, and engagement. Expectations include those of the student, the faculty and the institution. He defines support to include academic, social, and financial support. Tinto

explains how providing early and meaningful assessment and feedback to students is crucial during their educational career. Assessing student performance is important, but assessing institutional performance is also crucial so that students receive the support and services they need and institutions monitor how well they are meeting their retention goals. The fourth success condition in Tinto's model includes the involvement or engagement of students with their peers (and faculty) in both an academic and social context. While these four success conditions are important individually, Tinto (2012) argues that when they are all present, they will lead to student success, retention, and increased graduation rates. There has been considerable research on the four areas of student success practices but Tinto concedes that most of the research in these areas has focused on traditional aged undergraduate students at residential 4-year colleges. See Figure 1.

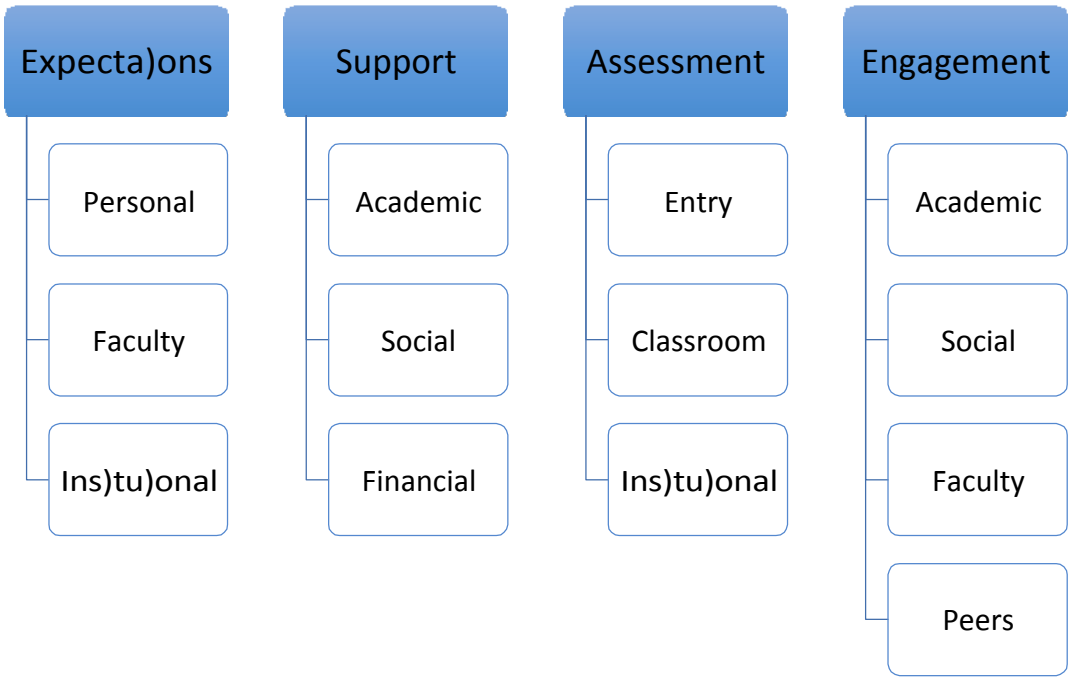

Figure 2. Tinto's (2012) four conditions of student success (with subcategories).

The scarcity of research on nontraditional students enrolled at nontraditional (online, 2-year, and trade) institutions could present a problem for higher education if the predicted trends come to fruition. Tinto's (2012) estimate of the percentage of bachelor's students that will be attending college in nontraditional formats supports the justification for research in this area. Most of the research is based on first year traditional undergraduates, while the overwhelming majority of nontraditional college students are only beginning to emerge as a focus in current research.

Traditional and nontraditional aged bachelor's student populations can experience different interactions with the four success conditions. Chao and Good (2004), in a study of 43 nontraditional students at one public and one private institution in the Midwest, found that nontraditional students were more likely to attach specific future career goals with their return to college. These students had specific expectations (future career goals). In another study, Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) found in their comparison of 300 traditional and nontraditional aged students at an urban university that the nontraditional aged students were more intrinsically motivated. The nontraditional students enjoyed learning for the sake of learning and mastering the content being learned. This type of student may need less support or different types of support to be successful. Other studies suggest that specific challenges faced by nontraditional students, such as a lack of financial aid and family support, and part time enrollment may influence nontraditional student dropout rates (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). A nontraditional student with these challenges may need more support or may be at risk for being less engaged. Studies have shown differences between traditional and nontraditional aged bachelor's student populations, but the research has not yet clarified the student experience with the success conditions.

While research exists on success conditions at traditional 4-year schools with traditional students, the research is just beginning to explore the experiences of bachelor's students in online education and how their experiences may be different. The nontraditional educational setting often serves a different population than traditional 4-year undergraduate institutions. Nontraditional aged students are now the majority of all college students (Tinto, 2012). Nontraditional learners are often students who are fully employed, who have family responsibilities, and who may be attending class on a part time basis. While similarities might exist with traditional students, there are great possibilities that conditions for student success for nontraditional students in nontraditional environments are different. More research needs to be done to determine the similarities and differences between the traditional learner and the nontraditional learner in a nontraditional environment, so that this emerging group of learners can be provided with the success conditions they need to meet their educational goals.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the abundance of research that exists on student success practices and related retention efforts for the traditional aged student at residential 4-year schools, research is only beginning to emerge that specifically addresses the nontraditional student in online educational environments. Little research on this student population examines their perspectives of what contributes to their success based on their experiences. Likewise, insufficient research examines the benefits of Tinto's (2012) four conditions (expectations, support, assessment, and engagement) for student success in online environments. This emerging field of peer-reviewed research supports the need for further studies examining the adult student pursuing education in nontraditional learning environments. Research on adult students' perceptions of factors leading to success and increased persistence in online degree programs is timely.

The current research study will examine if there are specific practices and conditions that exist that support retention of adult learners in distance learning environments. In addition, by interviewing adult students about their specific experiences, this research could help to determine if common or different conditions exist that lead to their student success. It is possible that the adult students' perceptions of the conditions for success may also vary depending on the educational setting (online). These findings could then shape future retention programs to better suit the nontraditional student needs in the environment that they have chosen.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in an online undergraduate bachelor's degree program and their perceptions of the student success conditions. This study seeks to understand and describe the conditions that influence student success (expectations, support, engagement, and feedback) specifically for nontraditional students in online classes. This study will explore the lived experience of nontraditional online bachelor's students enrolled in a private university in a nontraditional program by gathering their perceptions of student success conditions. This study will describe in rich detail how nontraditional students perceive the success conditions in an online environment and examine if any differences exist among the perceptions based on age, gender, ethnicity or demographic data. This research will inform higher education professionals on the lived experience of nontraditional students participating in nontraditional higher education settings. This research will specifically address the student perspective and perception of each of the conditions for student success, as well as how they interact in an online environment. This study expects to develop an understanding of the student experience and what students perceive would best help them to be successful in achieving their educational goals. This study will also add to

the research on differences that may exist in the perceptions of student success conditions depending on the educational environment, specifically online course work.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do nontraditional students perceive institutional conditions of student success while enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program?

- How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?
- How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?
- What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?
- How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of student success from students of different sociodemographic, age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds?

Key Definitions

- Assessment (or feedback): "Faculty members give students frequent, immediate, corrective, and supportive feedback on their performance" (Woodard et al., 2001, p. 67). Assessment should also include institutional self-assessment to determine if educational goals are successfully being met. In this study, assessment and feedback are measured by asking participants to describe their experiences with feedback in the classroom, entry assessments or placement tests, and institutional assessments.
- Community college (also known as junior college or a 2-year institution): Typically an open admission institution of higher learning serving the surrounding area for 2-year associates degree programs, educational enrichment, and lifelong learning.

- Expectation: "The expectations that a student holds about attending college (e.g., what the student expects to get out of college, the experiences the student expects to have in college) and about his or her abilities, strengths, and weaknesses" (Woodard, Mallory, DeLuca, 2001, p. 61). In this study, expectations are measured by asking participants to describe their experiences with personal expectations, faculty expectations, and institutional reputation.
- Engagement (or involvement): "An important means by which students develop feelings about their peers, professors, and institutions that give them a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging while simultaneously offering rich opportunities for learning and development" (Harper & Quaye, 2008, pp. xxii-xxiii). For the purpose of this study, engagement or involvement are measured by asking participants to describe their experiences of engagement with faculty and peers, in both academic and social settings.
- First time undergraduate student: A student who has no prior experience in higher education and is attending college for the first time (NCES Glossary, 2014).
- Four-year college or university: Typically a residential institution of higher learning that offers the baccalaureate (bachelors degree) as the terminal undergraduate degree
- Full time student undergraduate: A student enrolled for 12 or more semester credits or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term (NCES Glossary, 2014).
- Independent student: "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" (Federal student aid, 2013, Glossary).

- Nontraditional student: An adult student over the age of 24, often employed while attending college, could also be married or have children. A general term used to describe commuter, part time, transfer or returning students according to Silverman, Aliabadi and Stiles (as cited in Harper & Quaye, 2008).
- Nontraditional educational setting: For the purpose of this study, the non-traditional setting will include distance learning courses and online courses.
- Online education: For the purpose of this study, online education will include any distance-learning course or courses as part of a degree program.
- Part time student undergraduate: A student enrolled for either less than 12 semester or quarter credits, or less than 24 contact hours a week each term (NCES Glossary, 2014).
- Persistence: For the purpose of this study, persistence is successfully completing each class and progressing through the required courses in the bachelors degree program towards the degree completion.
- Retention rate: A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For 4-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions, this is the percentage of first-time degree-seeking or certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall (NCES Glossary, 2014).

- Student success conditions: Per Tinto (2012), the four conditions of student success are: expectations, support, engagement and feedback.
- Success: While many studies suggest student success can only be clearly defined by degree completion (graduation), this study will allow students to identify their own purpose for attending college. When their personalized goals are defined, students will have their own definition of success. This study will seek to identify patterns or themes among the experiences of students with the same personalized goals.
- Support: For this study, support is defined by the experiences the students describe with the academic, social and financial assistance that they may receive either from themselves, their family, or from their academic institution.
- Traditional student: An 18- to 23-year-old attending college for the first time, typically at a 4-year residential institution, and with parental support.
- Transfer student: A student who has attended another higher education institution at the same level. A transfer student may or may not transfer credits (NCES Glossary, 2014).
- University: An institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees; specifically: one made up of an undergraduate division which confers bachelor's degrees and a graduate division which comprises a graduate school and professional schools each of which may confer master's degrees and doctorates.

Theoretical Framework

After nearly 40 years of research on student retention, Tinto (2012) posits that there are four institutional conditions that must exist for students to be successful: (a) expectations, (b) support, (c) assessment and (d) engagement. While each of these conditions is individually

important to student success, Tinto advocates that the presence of and interaction among all four conditions truly leads to the greatest potential for student success. A visual representation of Tinto's four success conditions can be found in Figure 2.

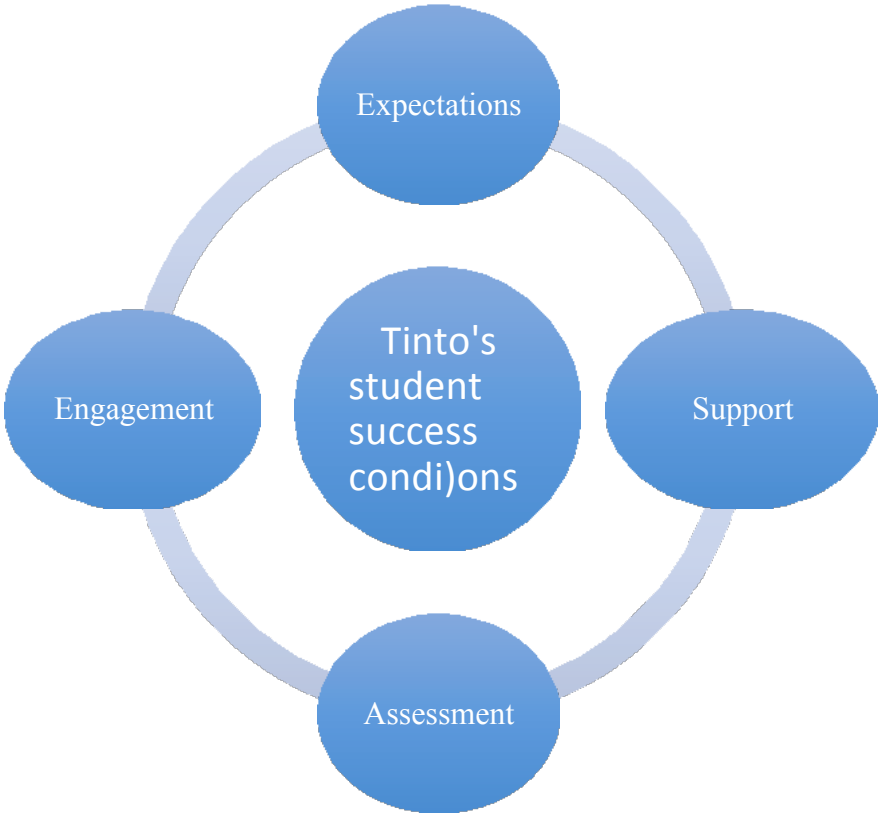

Figure 3. Tinto's (2012) student success conditions.

As Tinto explains, expectations are the beliefs that the student brings to the educational experience, including expectations about the institution and the students own abilities to succeed socially and academically (Tinto, 2012). Support, as explained by Tinto, is the condition needed to provide the student with the necessary tools to succeed socially and academically at the institution. The concept of assessment indicates the importance for the student to receive feedback early and often on his or her social and academic progress in the educational career, as well as institutional self-assessment to determine if goals are being met. Tinto defines

engagement as how the student experiences academic and social involvement, often concurrently through cohort groups or learning communities.

Overall, the conditions for student success require students understanding of the expectations, believing that they can succeed in their college experience, and being provided with the tools to do so. Students must also get involved in all aspects of their experience and be provided with feedback and assessment creating a supportive educational environment for personal and academic growth. While most theories of student departure and retention have been based on traditional students in 4-year college settings (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), the research needs to be expanded to include adult students in community college and in online programs. In his book *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, Malcolm Knowles (1973) was one of the first to introduce the theory of adult learning, believing that adults learn differently and experience learning differently. In consideration of the adult student population, this study will examine nontraditional student success through Tinto's four success conditions.

In his original research on traditional students at residential colleges, Tinto (1975) found that student expectations and motivations contributed to the students' overall institutional commitment. The need to understand the importance of why students should learn something and how it can impact their lives is one of the assumptions of adult learners in Knowles' andragogical model. Another assumption in Knowles' model is that adults come to learning opportunities with a readiness to learn. Similar to Tinto's success condition that addresses expectations, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) propose that each student will have their own perspective of what he or she needs to learn to help him or her to be successful.

While Tinto reported that the background characteristics of the student are important to consider, he also believed dropout could be predicted if one knew the students' expectations and

motivations. Tinto's model of "drop out behavior" is viewed as the landmark study that began the national discussion on student retention. Based on the suicide theory of Emile Durkheim, Tinto (1975) suggests that students who do not feel integrated and included in the academic and social life of the college community are more like to drop out. His student integration model suggests that students who are able to make social connections on campus will increase their likelihood of graduating from that institution.

Based on Tinto's research (1975), expectations and engagement (creating the opportunities for social connections and interactions with both peers and faculty and staff) are considered important conditions for student success. While these original studies were based on traditional undergraduate students, this researcher believes that expectations will continue to be an important condition in student success with nontraditional students as well. Bozarth, Chapman, and LaMonica (2004) conducted a study in which "findings indicated that there is a need for online learners to understand the time commitment required of an online course and possess or develop strong time management skills" (p. 87). Based on this, the researcher hopes that the current study will determine how students' perceptions of online institutions and the expectations needed to be successful at them may vary.

The concept of support as set forth by Tinto is tied closely to the concept of institutional expectations, positing that some students will need assistance in meeting the expectations required for academic and social success. Knowles believed that adults would likely be motivated to learn through natural curiosity or a love of learning, but may need some assistance. Usually, a strong support system is available on a residential campus for the residential student, but getting needed support can be a challenge to the online student. For those students who might need additional assistance, several studies provide practices that have resulted in improved

student success, academic performance, and retention. Such programs include orientation, first year seminars, mentoring and advising. Orientation in particular is a time for students to learn how to access campus resources remotely (Carruth, Broussard, Waldmeier, Gauthier, & Mixon, 2010; Lorenzetti, 2002; O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). For the nontraditional student who may already have other outside responsibilities such as work or family, the additional pressure to find assistance online may be a challenge.

Assessment is an important condition for student success. It takes place both on the student level and at the institutional level. Students need clear, timely feedback early on in their educational experiences to determine if they are being successful in meeting the expectations of the institution (Tinto, 2012). Institutions should take part in assessment to determine if they are being successful in meeting their own expectations and goals. Some research findings made a point of clearly mentioning the need for continuous evaluation and improvement of the institution's online programs (Dalziel & Payne, 2001; Lorenzetti, 2002, 2006; Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). Assessment of online programs should determine if technology is current and also consistently evaluate if the online program is assisting in achieving institutional goals. Based on the importance of assessment and feedback, this study will consider students' perception of the feedback they receive in the classroom and at the institutional level. Students will be asked if the institution seeks their feedback and if they are asked to participate in assessments of institutional programs.

Student engagement in academics has also had support in the academic literature and popular press as an important condition for student success. The importance of engagement has been around for 50 years, since "educational psychologist Ralph Tyler … showed the positive effects of time-on-task learning" and "C. Robert Pace developed the College Student

Experiences Questionnaire which framed the construct as a quality of effort" (Harper & Quaye, 2008, p. 313). Astin (1970a) developed one of the earliest models addressing involvement (or engagement). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) summarize Astin's theory quite simply as "students learn by becoming involved" (p. 50). Astin's theory of student involvement postulates that students who are more involved and have higher quality involvements will be more successful in college. Knowles (2005) believed that adult students are ready to learn when they know that what they are learning will have practical application in their lives. As stated, most of this research was done with traditional residential undergraduates. While other factors besides age (employment, dependents) have been used to identify a student as nontraditional, the minimum criteria for this study will be age (at least 24 years of age). The current study plans to determine how nontraditional aged students in online environments experience engagement and their perceptions about how their engagement contributes to their online success.

These four conditions of student success (expectations, support, assessment and engagement) have garnered substantial support from other notable researchers in the field, yet the majority of the research is still based on traditional aged students at residential colleges and universities. Due to the increasing adult student enrollments at both online and community colleges, it is appropriate to explore how these nontraditional students perceive the conditions for student success in their settings. Based on Tinto's work, but in consideration of a new student demographic, this study will explore the perceptions of the institutional success conditions with the nontraditional aged student at online colleges and universities. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discuss this limitation in the research, but acknowledge, "life span theories are becoming increasingly important as larger numbers of older students enter (or return to) college" (p. 17).

It is expected, based on the theoretical framework, that students will report that Tinto's success conditions have impacted their higher education experience. It is hoped that this research will provide more detail into how students perceive each of the conditions individually and as an integrated whole. Each of the research questions has been developed to explore the perceptions of the nontraditional student in regards to the four success conditions. Initial demographic surveys and follow-up interviews may demonstrate patterns of students' perceptions of one or more success conditions as being more important. These methods may also illustrate differences in the perceptions of nontraditional students in an online setting.

Retention and graduation rates reported in the media for both 2- and 4-year institutions are of traditional students coming directly from high school to attend college for the first time. This data is usually disaggregated for gender and ethnicity (NCES, 2014). However, the typical student body, in the United States, may not be first time students and are often nontraditional students age 25 or older (Tinto, 2012). The data for this population is often missing from the literature and reports in the media. There is evidence that nontraditional students who are older, work full-time, or have dependents take more time to complete their degrees and are more likely to leave without completing a degree (Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008). While each of these criteria (age, employment, dependents) can identify a student as nontraditional, only age will be used as inclusion criteria for this study. College leaders want students to be successful and graduate, but according to Lewin (2010) less than one quarter of students who start a degree program actually earn an associate's degree within 3 years. This study will address the nontraditional online student perceptions of their educational experiences and their insights about the success conditions in those experiences. See Figure 3.

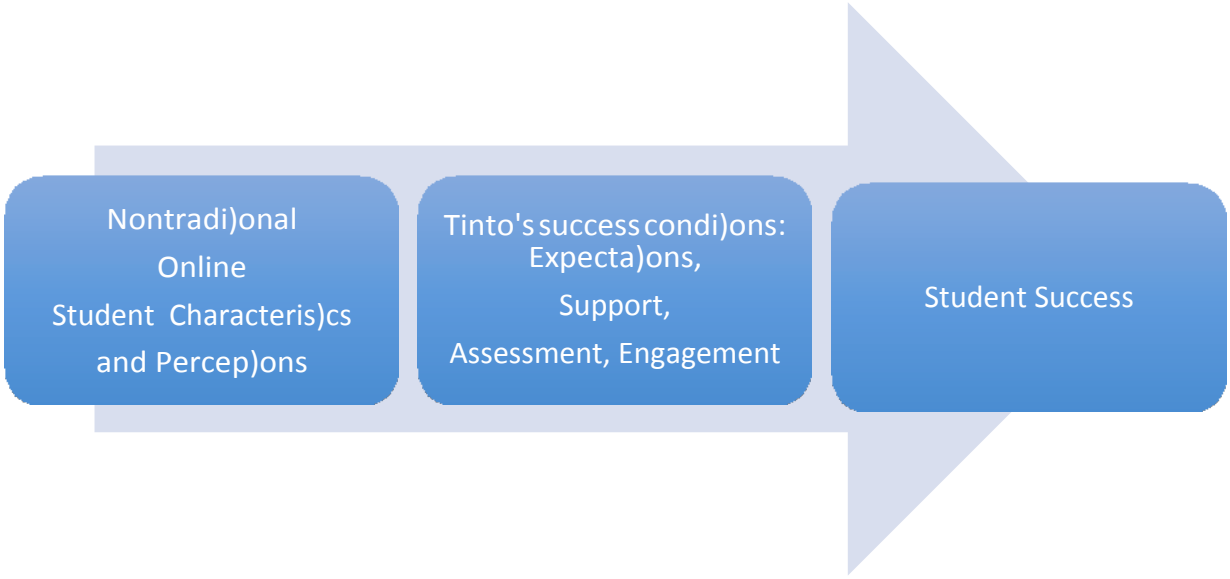

Figure 4. A visual representation of nontraditional online students and Tinto's success conditions.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the availability of research participants. The researcher was only able to secure a certain number of students. While every student who responded to the request for participants was personally contacted, a few students did not maintain contact and therefore could not be interviewed. All interview data was self-reported by the participants and subject to the accuracy of their recollections. The researchers decision to use a phenomenological methodology and selected research design also limited the study, resulting in no control group. Also due to the nature of this qualitative study, the researcher will not be able to conduct long-term follow up with the participants. Chen (2014) indicates a limitation of qualitative studies may be the generalizability to other populations. This study yielded a small, but diverse group of students. Yet, since the rich description of the experience is specific to a particular group of students in this study at a specific time, another group of students may have a different experience.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions that guided this study. It was assumed that students would want to participate in this study to add to the body of knowledge. Also, that students would participate honestly in all aspects of the study, including in their orientation and classes, surveys, interviews, or focus groups. The researcher assumed that participating in interviews would not harm the participants. Lastly, it was assumed that all participants would not be able to be identified personally in the published findings and that the confidentiality of all data would be able to be maintained.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of four additional chapters. A review of the literature comprises Chapter 2. Literature on the history of distance education, literature of the nontraditional student and their needs, as well as literature findings on each of the student success conditions will be included to provide a comprehensive basis for the study. Chapter 3 describes the proposed research methodology, reliability and validity, and data gathering procedures of this study. Chapter 4 consists of the results from the research. Chapter 5 discusses the research findings, draws conclusions from these findings, and suggests some recommendations for further research on the topic and this group of students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter on the literature and the research in this area begins with a brief review of the history of online education, to provide a background on this growing medium in higher education. Next area presented will be the literature findings on nontraditional student and their needs for student success. Lastly, the researcher will review the literature findings on the theoretical framework, which includes the four conditions of student success: expectations, support, engagement and feedback. Previous research on each individual success condition will be explored briefly to provide a summary of the findings to date.

History of Distance Learning

While online education is a newer phenomenon, distance education has been around for almost 2 centuries (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011; Walker & Kelly, 2007). The history of distance education traces back to the late 1800s when colleges offered correspondence courses as an educational option. Correspondence courses have been documented in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States. In these countries, students could take classes in their own homes and mail documents to their professors (Kiryakova, 2009) or professors would travel off campus to meet with students (Meyer, 2002).

While the postal service was instrumental in early distance learning correspondence courses, the advent of the telephone, television, audiotapes, and videotapes changed the education process (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Meyer, 2002). Travel by professor or student became unnecessary. It was no longer necessary to mail written materials or to rely on written materials alone. With this advent, written materials could now be supplemented with visually interesting video and presented in a more entertaining manner.

In one example of the entertainment factor in distance learning, continuing education courses were provided to teachers in the early 1960s (Schejbal, 2012). According to Kiryakova (2009), "this allowed for visualization of education and increased its effectiveness" (p. 29). While no data is available to prove the additional effectiveness, delivering course content through visual means set the stage for further educational developments in efficiency and cost savings when computers came into common use.

When computers first became more accessible and available to the public, in the early 1970s, the computer was basic and was used in education mainly for teleconferencing and bulletin boards (Desai et al., 2008; Swail & Kampits, 2001). The bulletin board system allowed the user to ask (or post) a question to the board or answer questions previously posted by others. The bulletin board was a slow way to learn and communicate, but in a time of limited options it was popular. "At their peak in the early 1990s," according to Meyer (2010), "almost 45,000 bulletin board systems were in existence" (p. 144).

Throughout the 1990s, as computer systems improved, specific course management systems began to garner attention. Many improvements were made to systems to allow for online chat functionality, shared screen features, and assessment tools. According to Desai, Hart, and Richards (2008), this was also a time in which priority was given to the standardization and organization of online courses. These improvements made learning management systems easier to use and allowed for the integration of multimedia. The learning management systems also began to support a more collaborative learning environment (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005).

In addition, online programs expanded into graduate course work. In 1995, Walden University was the first university in the United States to offer the first fully online master's

degree in Educational Change and Technology Innovation (Harrison, 2007). In 1997, Walden University followed with an online doctoral program.

In the early 2000s, the concept of open courses making courses available to anyone began to take shape. Universities began to put some course lectures online for free, available to any student located where there was Internet access (Matkin, 2012; Schejbal, 2012). The open movement was seen as an equalizer to provide access to higher education in areas where none had previously existed.

The United States was not the only country involved in expanding open, online learning options. Founded by the British government in 1971, the Open University is exclusively online and has never offered any traditional (in person) classroom courses. The Open University is purely distance education that has served more than 2 million students since its inception (Schejbal, 2012).

Given the popularity of learning online, perhaps it should not have been so much of a surprise when no cost Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offered by Stanford University in 2011 attracted 160,000 students from 192 countries. Of that 160,000 only 23,000 completed the course (Kurzman, 2013; Matkin, 2012; Waldrop, 2013). As other reputable institutions like Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) quickly followed suit in offering MOOCs, 2012 became known as the year of the MOOC or the time of a MOOC revolution (Hyman, 2012; Long, 2013; Pearcy, 2014).

While more than 20% of students are now report taking at least one online course (NCES, 2014) in their degree program, there is a lack of research examining student learning, student success, student support and the other major academic implications of the increased participation in online courses. The purpose of this research was to determine if the different conditions that

have been identified as leading to student success for traditional aged students exist, and are meaningful in online settings for the nontraditional student. The experience of the nontraditional learners in these nontraditional environments was explored to add to the body of knowledge on student success conditions and student retention.

Defining Nontraditional Students and Their Needs

In 2002, Evelyn reported only a quarter of currently enrolled students fell into what is considered to be traditionally enrolled students. A traditional student is defined as a student who had recently graduated from high school, is enrolled as a full-time student, and has parental financial support. Jenkins found that by 2012, only 15% met this traditional definition. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) defines a first-time undergraduate student as one who "has no prior postsecondary experience attending any institution" (NCES, 2014b, Glossary). The definition of nontraditional student has some variation, but most of the literature findings revolve around two main factors influencing the student: financial and personal.

Employment classifies the nontraditional student experience in several ways. A study of nontraditional students at a community college found that many working students identified themselves as employees first, before considering themselves as students (Kim, Sax, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010). Since nontraditional students are often working full time, their education can be affected in many ways. Working students have less time available to devote to their studies, and have less time to take advantage of support services. In addition, working students may not be attending school full time, which may then affect their eligibility for financial assistance including student loans, federal grants, and institutional scholarship (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Jinkens (2009) found that nontraditional students are often focused on their careers, hoping to gain practical knowledge from their education that they can apply to their work setting. Nontraditional students often have difficulty balancing work and school responsibilities. Their employment is an important factor in their enrollment in school, but can often be the cause for what challenges their success. Houser (2006) supported these ideas and reported that because of the students' focus on employment, nontraditional students spend all their available time on learning and less on engaging with others in class.

The nontraditional student can also be defined by their personal characteristics, including age and dependent children. Evelyn (2002) and Jinkens (2009) reported that the nontraditional student is defined by having dependent children living at home that they financially support. According to the Federal government definition for financial aid, an independent, adult student is one with dependent children. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found that the combination of less financial aid and fewer interactions on campus along with childcare issues led to higher dropout rates among nontraditional students at a community college.

The age of nontraditional students can also be a factor in their potential for success. Wyatt (2011) suggested that the nontraditional student has been out of school longer and may find some courses, such as math and science, more difficult due to their time away from it. Schaefer (2010) also found that being an older student in combination with being a first-generation college student could result in having the additional challenge of being unfamiliar with educational processes in addition to their employment, time constraints and other conditions mentioned.

Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) reported on the stress of juggling multiple responsibilities as another factor that defines the nontraditional student experience. They found

that online students when examined as a population and nontraditional students when examined as a separate population have some similar characteristics. They seem less worried about failure. Ke and Kwak (2013) reported on students that were both nontraditional and online students.

Supporting the Nontraditional Student

Support for the nontraditional student should address the variety of challenges they face, according to Bauman et al. (2004). Ke and Kwak (2013) as well as other researchers challenged institutions to provide more support to these populations (Giancola et al., 2009). Carriuolo (2002) is critical of online education programs and nontraditional institutions for not providing the support that these learners require to be successful. One area of support experts suggest for nontraditional students is their own orientation, one that addresses some of the specific needs of the nontraditional student. During this orientation, students could receive guidance and instruction on time management skills and how best to balance work, children, and school (Bauman et al., 2004; Jeffries, 2010). In addition, Bauman et al. (2004) suggest nontraditional students would benefit from their own financial aid resources, career counseling, and library services that would address the nontraditional students' unique needs. Wyatt (2011) adds that institutional programs should not appeal only to nontraditional students, but should also include their families.

On the classroom level, Jenkins (2012) suggests that instructors should design courses to meet nontraditional student needs. In particular, for the nontraditional student focused on work, the relevance of the course material to employment is important. Nontraditional students will be able to contribute their experience and enrich class discussion if the instructor is able to engage the students. It has also been shown that satisfaction with and relevance of course work can contribute to persistence in online classes (Park & Choi, 2009).

Several studies suggested that the needs of the nontraditional student could be met through mentoring or success coaches (Jeffries, 2010; Rendón, 1998; Schrum, English, & Galizio, 2012; Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates, & Glass, 2011). Rendón (1998) found that nontraditional students reported how one particular person had made a difference in their decision to persist through college. Whether an instructor, staff or administrator, the one person who provided additional support and encouragement to the student made enough of a difference to keep the student enrolled (Rendón, 1998). Success coaches can provide nontraditional students with the guidance they need in areas like developing critical thinking and decision-making skills (Jeffries, 2010). Edirisingha (2009) even suggested that mentoring mature students in an e-learning environment could also help the nontraditional student with the transition to higher education, while also increasing familiarity and comfort with online technology.

Hardin (2008) reported on specific curricular considerations that lead to improving the experience for nontraditional online students. Hardin suggested that working students need more flexible schedules including evening, weekend, and online courses. The study also suggested that quality day care should be provided on campus for nontraditional students with children. Lastly, Hardin (2008) suggested that faculty and support services provide extended office hours that would be more accessible for the nontraditional student.

Overall, studies have shown that nontraditional students' experiences with support services can influence success, satisfaction, and degree completion (Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek, 2010; Schaefer, 2010; Scott & Lewis, 2011). Some studies imply that nontraditional students are more than twice as likely to drop out in the first year (Jenkins, 2012). It is not only necessary to understand who nontraditional students are, but also to be aware of how they should be supported in order to help them to achieve their educational goals.

Literature on the Success Conditions

Vincent Tinto's work serves as the theoretical framework for this research. After nearly 40 years of research and publications on student retention, in 2012 Tinto published his most recent book integrating many of the principles from his past research. His book entitled *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* has summarized his findings into four student success conditions: expectations, support, assessment, and engagement. He devoted a chapter to each of these conditions, but admitted that most of his research was based on traditional aged students at residential institutions. Each of the student success conditions will be reviewed in the literature review, including any research that may apply to the nontraditional student in a nontraditional setting.

Condition 1: Expectations. Tinto's theory on student persistence addresses the importance of expectations. An expectation is defined as a belief that something will happen or is likely to happen and/or a feeling or belief about how successful or good someone or something will be (Webster's Dictionary, 2014). The expectations that college students establish for the college or university experience are related to their beliefs and knowledge about the process and experience. Students whose family or friends have experience with college and educational institutions and accurately portray the college experience will contribute to students having more accurate expectations. Torenbeek, Jansen, and Hofman (2010) suggest that the first-year students' success or failure can be attributed to preparation and accurate expectations of what their college experience will entail.

Tinto (2012) reported on three types of expectations related to college student success: personal expectations, academic expectations (the student performance expectations set by faculty), and institutional expectations. Tinto (2012) described the essential traits of expectations

as being clear, consistent, and high; "simply put, no one rises to low expectations" ("Expectation", n.d., para. 1).

Expectations: Personal. Attitude and belief in his or her own abilities can play an important role in whether or not a student is indeed successful. Self-efficacy is described as the belief or confidence in one's own ability to achieve or complete a task. Bandura and Locke (2003) explain, "Self-efficacy beliefs are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects" (p. 87). In their study of 344 traditional undergraduates students, Dewitz, Woosley, and Walsh (2009) found that increased self-efficacy contributed to increased retention and eventual degree completion. In a survey of first year undergraduate students, Devonport and Lane (2006) conclude that institutional programs aimed at increasing student self-efficacy need to be studied to determine their effectiveness and influence on retention.

To help institutions that serve nontraditional students develop more robust and successful retention programs, it is valuable to identify the existing differences between traditional and nontraditional students, the educational setting of the nontraditional student, and the students' perceived beliefs about what contributes to their success. The different life experiences of traditional and nontraditional students shape their perceptions of their ability to succeed. Adults returning to school for additional training or career transition will also have different beliefs about their capabilities.

Bean and Eaton (2001) describe the need to address increasing student self-efficacy in student services as a way to increase retention. They believe that by increasing each individual student's beliefs in himself or herself, students will then begin to expect success in the academic and social college environments. Their article detailed the conditions of success that lead to

social and academic integration and positively influence the student's self-efficacy and other psychological processes.

Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995) found a relationship between preparation for the college experience, the expectation of what the experience will encompass, and student satisfaction with the college experience. Their study of 263 first time freshmen entering 4-year colleges and universities also indicated that when a student's expectation of the academic and social environment is accurate, it leads to an increase in academic and social integration. In turn, when academic and social expectations are combined with expectations of career development, there is an increase in students' intent to return to college.

A study by Kreig (2013) found that student's expectations of having little contact with parents once away at college to be one of the few expectations for which students were not well prepared. This study examined the beliefs and expectations of students admitted to a 4-year college during their first year and followed up during their senior year. While traditional, residential students may expect college to be a time to develop more independence from family, Krieg (2013) found that 36 of the students who participated in both phases of the study were somewhat conflicted about this new phase of their development and still relied on their parents for support.

For traditional students whose parents are involved in their lives, there is a parental expectation of success in college. Charles, Roscigno, and Torres (2007) used National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) data over four time periods (8th grade, 10th grade, and 12th grade and 2 years post high school) of over 13,000 students. They found that those high parental expectations positively correlated to student support factors, such as being involved in family discussions about education and college plans and saving money for college.

Expectations: Academic. McCann, Immel, Kadah-Ammeter, and Priniski (2013) specifically addressed students' course grade expectations in a study of all grade levels of 584 students taking a psychology course at a 4-year institution, community college, or technical college. This study found that grade requirements varied by course levels and institutions, which sometimes left students unaware of what grade to expect or the typical grade distributions for a class. Students believed that their effort would contribute towards the grade they expected without really knowing what the faculty member expected. In addition, the faculty member's expectations tended to be higher than the students. Frequently, faculty expected more from the student for a high grade, while the student thought he or she had already achieved the benchmark. The study suggests that advisors or faculty can help students properly manage expectations.

In a similar study, van der Meer, Jansen and Torenbeek (2010) suggested that the disconnect between student and faculty expectations should be handled by the faculty. In their study of first year students in New Zealand and the Netherlands, they found that students seemed to expect that they would work hard in college. The study reports that it is the first-year instructor's responsibility to be clear about academic expectations. Both studies agreed that the faculty needs to be clear about grading expectations especially in the first semester, when it is crucial that new students become familiar with the academic expectations.

Braxton et al. (1995) found "the greater the extent to which expectations for academic and intellectual development are being fulfilled, the greater the degree of academic integration and social integration experienced by the student" (pp. 604-605). While this study of 263 first time freshman also concludes that academic integration and social integration can lead to greater institutional commitment, the authors also deduce that the study should be replicated at 2 and 4-

year commuter institutions. In a study of traditional aged transfer students, Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, and Santos Laanan (2013) found that students held accurate expectations about the transfer to a 4-year school. The students expected the 4-year institution to be more academically challenging than the community college. The authors suggest institutions that accept transfers have resources that assist in managing expectations for the academic integration into a new institution.

Another type of academic expectation involves the feedback students receive regarding their academic work. While feedback and assessment is another condition of student success according to Tinto (2012), the expectation of feedback is included in the expectation success condition. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2009) found that incoming college students expected to receive feedback in a timely fashion (as they might in secondary school), but in reality, it could take up to 6 weeks for work to be returned from faculty in college. In this study, the students surveyed expected feedback, but instructors clearly admitted that "they generally did not provide feedback on drafts" (Brinkworth et al., 2009, p. 166). The mismatch between the expectation and reality with submitted work could be easily managed through addressing the issue in the syllabus or during first year programming, such as orientation.

The concept that college students' have certain expectations for their interactions with faculty has been examined in the literature. Students' expectations for faculty interaction could also be related to two of Tinto's other conditions for success: interaction and support. Cole and Korkmaz (2010) used longitudinal data from two nationally administered surveys, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); they found that students who had little or no faculty interaction in high school typically had the same experience in college. The researchers reported this could be due

to a lack of or low expectations for interacting with faculty, believing these interactions would be difficult for them to develop. Students also reported that when enrolled in college, they did not expect to seek out faculty for assistance when having academic difficulty in their classes. This attitude is particularly important when considering that students struggling in class and not seeking out help could likely experience academic failure in their first semester. To turn these findings into a condition for student success, institutions must find a way for positive student and faculty interaction. The Cole and Korkmaz (2010) study suggested "asking faculty and other campus staff to talk explicitly about the availability of faculty assistance and the positive benefits of such assistance early on in the first year" (p. 48).

Specific to online education, a common theme was the need for students to have realistic expectations about online education demands. Understanding the clear expectations of the course instructor, recognizing the expectations for course organization, and acknowledging expectations for social interaction are just a few examples of possible issues that can be addressed in orientation (Jugdev & Hutchison, 2004; Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2010; Robinson et al., 1996). In a similar article, Lorenzetti (2006) specifically mentions that expectations need to be clear not only for students but also for the faculty that teach online courses.

The expectation of the time that needs to be committed to successful participation in online education has also been examined in the literature. Bozarth et al. (2004) conducted a study in which "findings indicated that there is a need for online learners to understand the time commitment required of an online course and to possess or develop strong time management skills" (p. 87). The development of these skills can be addressed during the orientation as

suggested by additional studies (Dalziel & Payne, 2001; Gaide, 2005; Harrell, 2008; Tucker, 2012).

Studies examining personal commitment (Bozarth et al., 2004) and specifically their personal motivation (Cho, 2012) in online education report that students who can sustain their motivation and commitment will be less likely to drop an online class. Perry and Pilati (2011) report that "online learning requires students to be more self-motivated than traditional student who physically face their instructors and colleagues on a regular basis" (p. 100). This seems consistent with Tinto's belief that the classroom should be the focus of student success initiatives.

Expectations: Institutional. An institution-wide commitment is needed to understand and fulfill the expectations of students. Chickering and Kytle (1999) posit that the ideal college will have high expectations for student performance and will support students through the involvement of the entire institution in meeting increased demands. Tinto also suggested that the institution and its retention efforts have a large impact on student retention and that "institutional context matters" (Reason, 2009, p. 675). Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury, and Blaich (2010) add that for an institution to have such high expectations and provide the support to meet those expectations requires a full institutional commitment.

Tinto (2012) suggests that the institutional expectations should also include the support services needed to meet those expectations. Students need to be provided with the knowledge of what is needed to succeed and how to navigate support services for assistance in meeting their goals. For example, Tinto discusses the importance of providing advising assistance and mentors, areas that are also discussed in the support section of this literature review.

Expectations: Summary. The student success condition of expectations includes the expectations that students have about themselves, the expectation that the professors establish for student performance, and the institutional expectation. In any of these scenarios, Tinto postulates that all expectations need to be clearly communicated early in the college career for the student to be prepared to meet those expectations.

Condition 2: Support. Tinto hypothesizes that institutions can take action to improve retention and graduation rates of undergraduate students. He particularly stresses the need for all of these critical supports to be in place very early on in a student's collegiate career. The importance of the classroom is highlighted as potentially the one place on campus where all students participate and, therefore, interact with the institution. This is especially true of the nontraditional or community college student who may not be living on campus.

As Tinto (2012) reviews the support needed for students to be successful, he focuses on three main support areas: academic, social and financial. The academic areas of support include an understanding of student self-efficacy. In addition, Tinto discusses a variety of specific academic support programs, including orientation, summer bridge programs, first year seminars, learning communities and mentoring. For the social or student services component of student support, Tinto refers to the need for mental health counseling, academic advising, and peer mentoring. Finally, in the discussion of financial support, Tinto discusses the difference between grant aid and student loans, and he mentions the importance of family financial support. Each of these areas will be reviewed.

***Support: Academic*.** Tinto (2012) stresses the need to increase students' self-efficacy by finding academic success early on their college career. In support of Tinto's beliefs about self-efficacy, Devonport and Lane (2006) conclude that institutional programs aimed at increasing

student self-efficacy need to be studied to determine their effectiveness and influence on coping skills and, ultimately, on retention. Their study of freshman found some support to the belief that low self-efficacy leads to drop out.

In order to help institutions that serve nontraditional students develop more robust and successful retention programs, it is valuable to identify the perceptions of adult college students about what they can accomplish with proper support. Non-traditional students have different life experiences that shape the students' perceptions of their ability to succeed. Adults returning to school for additional training or career transition will also have different beliefs about their capabilities and complex support needs (Schaefer, 2010).

A study by Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2005; as cited by Endres, Chowdhury, Frye, & Hurtubis, 2009) discussed concern over student satisfaction and persistence; the study demonstrated that "student satisfaction is affected by all aspects of the educational experience…satisfaction with course rigor and fairness, with professor and peer interaction, and with support systems" (p. 31). Support systems can be particularly important at the beginning of the students' educational career, when they are not yet familiar with the process of being in college (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Tinto, 2012).

Support: First year academic support programs. Orientation programs were developed to provide students with the needed academic support early in college, and even before college begins. According to Bell, Gass, Nafziger, and Starbuck (2014), "orientation programs currently exist at all accredited colleges in the United States, and informal orientation activities (e.g., rituals and initiation rites for first-year students) have been prevalent since the beginning of colleges and universities in the 1400s" (p. 32). Boston University has the distinction of having

the first formal orientation program on record; it was implemented in 1888 (as cited in Gass, 1986).

In a study based at the University of Michigan in 1946, the university considered a variety of efforts to reorient soldiers returning from World War II (Donahue & Tibbits, 1946). One effort included a "more popular 4-week, pre-term review of basic subjects" (p. 137) and provided the soldiers with the academic support needed. While the academic reorientation was one issue, the study also addressed the entire range of personal or social adjustment problems that the veteran population faced. While the specific demographic of a soldier returning to school provided the basis for this study, it also laid the foundation for colleges and universities to consider the benefits of the pre-term orientation.

One unique type of pre-term orientation moves the activity off campus creating an outdoor bonding and adventure experience. Bell et al. (2014) describe these programs as being "found at more than 191 colleges in the United States" (p. 33) and tend to be service-based or camp-based. One of the goals of these adventure programs, like most orientation programs, is to provide the students with early socialization opportunities and to assist them in integrating into the culture of the college. The pre-term orientation, which specifically begins and ends prior to the semester in which academic courses start, is only one type of orientation format.

Some orientation programs have the student concurrently enrolled in the orientation program and in some type of academic coursework over the summer. This type of pre-term orientation is sometimes also referred to as a summer bridge or pre-freshman summer program for the institution that expects students to begin their college degree program in the fall. Research suggests that this type of program "can help facilitate their transition and adjustment to college life and improve persistence rates" (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1991, p. 161).

The last type of orientation for students involves a program that begins during the first semester while coursework is taken. The first-year experience program or first-year seminar typically lasts over the course of the entire first year in which the student is enrolled. According to the 2006 National Survey on First-Year Seminars (National Resource Center on the First College Year, n.d.), "84% of campuses have some form of first-year programming, including freshmen seminars, summer transition programs, leadership programs, living learning communities, freshmen interest groups (FIGs), and more" (Messineo, 2012, p. 67). These courses are generally small group format and taught by faculty at the institution as a credit-bearing course. As cited by Jessup-Anger (2011), "Existing research has illustrated many positive outcomes associated with first-year seminars, especially related to improvement in retention from first to second-year and subsequent graduation rates" (p. 102). The goal of improved persistence and retention, along with providing early opportunities for increased socialization, seems to hold true regardless of the format or duration of the traditional campus orientation programs.

Several studies suggested that for those students who might need additional assistance, orientation is the time for students to learn how to access campus resources remotely (Carruth et al., 2010; Lorenzetti, 2002; O'Gara et al., 2009). For the student new to online education, knowing who to ask for assistance is important. Institutions can help the online students to still feel a part of the college community and campus by making sure they understand the plethora of resources available to them.

Support: Academic support program (mentoring). Another form of positive faculty interaction can take place in the form of mentoring. In a study by Campbell, Smith, Dugan, and Komives (2012), several positive aspects of faculty mentoring were reviewed including

individualized academic advising, leadership development, and overall student success. While this study found support for the growing body of literature that suggests that in-class mentoring is important, the study found greater support for mentoring when the mentor helped the student grow personally. When the mentoring relationship was more meaningful and supportive, there was evidence of more positive psychosocial development in the student (Campbell et al., 2012).

Using data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), Strayhorn and Saddler (2009) also found positive effects mentors have on African-American undergraduates. They found mentoring did have a positive influence on satisfaction with college. While their study showed no difference in gender, their studies showed that older students aged 24 or older, which made up 16% of the sample, seemed to be more satisfied than their younger peers (Strayhorn & Saddler, 2009).

In a comprehensive review of literature from 1990-2007, Crisp and Cruz (2009) reported that "overall, findings have been positive and have indicated a positive relationship or an impact of mentoring on student persistence and/or grade point average of undergraduate students" (p. 532). Crisp and Cruz also noted that an overwhelming majority of studies are conducted exclusively at 4-year institutions, without findings that pertain to community college, for-profit, or technical colleges.

In a study on freshman and transfer undergraduates, Campbell and Campbell (2007) hypothesized that positive mentoring effects such as increased course completion and increased grade point average would also demonstrate higher graduation rates. However, the minimal positive effects found, when compared to the control group, were so small that they were not a statistically significant finding in the study. The authors concluded that mentoring is a complex notion needing better definitions and more research.

Bean and Eaton (2001) discuss several student psychological outcomes positively influenced by mentoring, which lead to greater academic integration. The mentor can serve as a resource for academic support and information about or referrals to university academic services. Bean and Eaton suggest that mentoring is beneficial because the mentor can help students adapt to their new academic environment, empower them to take responsibility for their own academic outcomes, and reinforce positive actions and activities that lead to greater success.

Support: Online education. The general theme addressed in assessing students learning ability and academic needs also included several studies specifically related to study skills (O'Gara et al., 2009). These studies suggest that the online orientation is an appropriate format to review and enhance study skills. "These services are critical for many new freshmen, who often lack the requisite study skills and personal discipline required to be successful in college" (Robinson et al., 1996, p. 63). The same study by Robinson et al. (1996) added that orientation is the best place to begin to address "academic skill development" (p. 63) in the academic areas where students may be lacking.

In addition, several studies indicated the importance of assessing student learning abilities to determine where student learning needs may arise. In a study by Tallman and Fitzgerald (2005), one of the seven elements considered in online course development was "how students would learn best (mode or style)" (p. 26). Gaide (2005) reports that "assessing students' individual learning styles makes it easier to help them understand how to effectively manage their time and fulfill course objectives" (p. 5). Knowing if the student is a kinesthetic, auditory or visual learner is just as important to the student to evaluate their path to success in the virtual world as it is in the traditional classroom.

Several studies considered how their technology skills contribute directly to the students' ability to successfully integrate academically within the college or university. Lorenzetti (2006) specifically discussed avoiding mission creep; academic integration should be the focus of orientation. Orientation cannot overstep its bounds, and orientation programming must find the right balance of activities and guidance at each institution. In support of this focus, the correlation of academic integration and increased retention has been documented (Ali & Leeds, 2009).

As one might expect when dealing with an online education format, technology skills and technology related issues were stressed most often. The general area for technology skills includes basic computer skills, course issues, accessing resources remotely, and overall academic integration to the institution. Expected basic technology skills included a familiarity with software and hardware, the learning management system (LMS), email and word processing applications. Student proficiencies in these areas can vary greatly. Some studies stressed the lack of preparedness or the need for stronger skills in these areas (Carruth et al., 2010; Tallman & Fitzgerald, 2005) either prior to enrollment or to be resolved during an orientation.

In 2009, the University of Phoenix began requiring students to complete a no cost, three-week online orientation program specifically designed to address technology preparedness (Blumenstyk, 2011). The University of Phoenix program required students to obtain materials from the online library and to work virtually with the online writing center to complete and upload an assignment. Failure to complete the task successfully meant a student had to wait 6 months and retake the orientation. Other studies suggested that it is important for students to use orientation to become more familiar with course structure, such as synchronous and asynchronous activities (Carruth et al., 2010; Scagnoli, 2001). Similarly, additional studies

agreed that the orientation should simulate course activities (Lorenzetti, 2002; O'Gara et al., 2009). This process allows students to become familiar with course structure in a safe test environment, without the additional stress of academic rigor or concern over grades.

Support: Social. Another theme in the literature involves the importance of the social interactions and the effects of positive interactions (Ali & Leeds, 2009; O'Gara et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 1996; Scagnoli, 2001; Trevino, 2006). Social interactions take place among students, but also between students and their professors. As Scagnoli (2001) purports, "Meeting new people and communicating effectively are important personal and professional learning experiences that contribute to the distance learners' academic adjustment, feeling of connection and commitment to the program" (p. 22). These results can ultimately help reduce attrition as well.

Some studies take the social interactions to a more personal level assigning either peer mentors or peer leaders to new online students (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012; Robinson et al., 1996). Robinson et al. (1996) clearly demonstrate the importance of a peer connection, explaining that "introducing students to professional and peer mentors during orientation can be a particularly effective way to enhance students' academic adjustment, facilitate student learning, and provide an important support system" (p. 59). This additional level of academic support combined with personal, social interaction can contribute to the online student's success.

Braxton and Lee (2005) concluded that researchers have consistently found a link between social integration, institutional commitment, and subsequent student persistence in residential colleges and universities specifically (Reason, 2009). Reason goes on to cite several other studies that show first year seminars and student support programs positively affect retention and graduation rates. Forrest (cited by Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) "found that a

group of nine institutions with the most comprehensive set of orientation and advising programs has a graduation rate 9% higher than that of a group of institutions with the least comprehensive programs" (p. 385). The effect of additional social support shows why Tinto considers it a condition for student success. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) clearly state, "Orientation programs serve as important early socialization functions" (p. 650).

Support: Financial. Federal financial aid programs, also known as Title IV aid, are focused most on Federal grants and student loans (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). According to Eglin (1993), "The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided two major types of aid to post-secondary students: grants for students from low-income families and subsidized loans for students from middle-income families" (p. 1). The Federal Pell Grant was the first need-based aid program developed by the government. Named after U.S. Senator Claiborne Pell, it is currently the largest federal need-based grant program available to undergraduate students. The current maximum annual award is $5,550. It is available only to undergraduates for a maximum of 12 semesters (Federal student aid, 2013) as long as students continue to make satisfactory academic progress. If a student's grade point average drops below the set standard or if the student exceeds 12 semesters, there is no federal grant program to assist a student in need. According to Rotherham (2012), Pell grants are being scrutinized because taxpayers now spend more money on the grant program, $36 billion in 2012, up from $14 billion in 2007, than on entire federal agencies.

Although Pell may not be available to all students at every level of their postsecondary education, each year students may be eligible for federal student loans as a part of the newly renamed direct loan program. "The Stafford program, founded in 1965 as the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, has accomplished its primary objective of providing loans to eligible

student borrowers" (Eglin, 1993, p. 1). Initially started as a subsidized program, the government now offers the subsidy only to those who qualify based on need as determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Unsubsidized loans are available to undergraduates who do not demonstrate financial need on the FAFSA. The subsidy on loans for graduate students was discontinued as of July 1, 2012 (Federal Student Aid, 2013). As of August 2013, the fixed interest rate was replaced with variable rates tied to the 10-year treasury rate, plus a fixed margin.

In 2011, total student loan debt was calculated to have exceeded the $1 trillion mark, composed of $864 billion in federal government loans and $150 billion in private student loan debt (Rampell, 2012). Students and families may see student loans as a deterrent to obtaining their dreams of higher education and a better future although the statistics show the increased earning potential with a college degree (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The government needs to find a way to support higher education, as the additional earnings and reduced unemployment will continue to stimulate the economy.

The effects of financial aid on student retention are mixed. According to McKinney and Novak (2013), grants have been positively associated with persistence, but studies specific to student loans find mixed results. Interestingly, not all community college students file the necessary Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form even though they would be eligible for the maximum grant available (Davidson, 2013; McKinney & Novak, 2013). The primary reason for not filing is usually cited as the difficulty of the paperwork and confusion about the FAFSA. In fact, a study found that by not filing a FAFSA, a community college student (especially if attending part time) is less likely to persist from their first to second

semester (McKinney & Novak, 2013). The need for financial literacy and financial aid support seems evident.

Condition 3: Assessment. Another condition for promoting student success, according to Tinto (2012), is assessment and feedback. Tinto stresses the importance of assessment and feedback during the first year while the student is adjusting to the college environment and transitioning to this new life setting. Students will not know if they are being successful or meeting social and academic expectations if no one provides them with timely and clear feedback. More specifically, Tinto suggests that assessment should happen on three levels: with the student upon entry, within the classroom, and on an institutional level.

Assessment: Entry. Student assessment upon entry or through placement testing is not a new idea. Institutions know that the first-year successes or failures can contribute to a student's decision to return to the institution. Placing the student in the appropriate level coursework is important for academic success and increasing self-efficacy, as discussed in the support section of this literature review. Hoyt and Sorensen (2001) refer to the "chain of blame" in determining why high school students who have completed their curriculum necessary to graduate high school are not fully prepared to take on the rigors of college courses. Regardless of who is to blame, students bear the academic and financial burden of additional remedial courses in college. While placing the student in the correct level of coursework is important for success, placement tests should be used carefully for those students whose scores may fall on the cusp of remedial placement. Placement tests may ignore the large body of research that proves that retention is more dependent on the student's experiences in college. In fact, Simpson (2008) suggests that "remedial approaches may set up more barriers in front of already disadvantaged learners by demoralizing them" (p. 160).

The general theme addressed in assessing students learning ability and needs also included several studies specifically about study skills (O'Gara et al., 2009). This study on community college students reports that the orientation is an appropriate format for reviewing and enhancing study skills, in anticipation of proper academic placement and to set the student up for academic success. A study by Robinson et al. (1996) added that orientation is the best place to begin to address "academic skill development" (p. 63) in the academic areas where students may be lacking. These authors also warn that inappropriately placing a student in advanced courses will also have a detrimental effect as this practice also reduces their chances for academic success.

Academic placement testing is typically given in specific subject areas (English and math) and used to place students in the appropriate level courses. However, some studies suggest that personality type testing should also be used to assess student preparedness and motivation to learn. In one example, Lorenzetti (2005) suggests that there should be pre-assessments specifically for online courses "because not all students have the skills and motivation for the highly self-paced nature of online education even if it is just a self-assessment to measure student readiness" (p. 1). Lorenzetti also suggests measuring noncognitive skills to predict online success, a different process from computer readiness or academic placement exams. This evaluation would be an element of student assessment that would specifically meet the needs of online learners.

Some research findings made a point of clearly mentioning the need for an educational institution to strive for continuous evaluation and improvement of their online orientation programs (Dalziel & Payne, 2001; Lorenzetti, 2002, 2006; Robinson et al., 1996). These concerns are raised not only by the need to keep technology current, but also to consistently

evaluate if the online orientation is achieving what the institution intended to achieve. One study conducted by Smyth and Lodge (2012) involved an online orientation program that has built-in assessments of the orientation itself. This provided the university with helpful and timely feedback as students completed the orientation online.

Assessment: Classroom. Researchers have considered the role of assessment in the online learning environment. In a study by Tallman and Fitzgerald (2005), one of the seven elements considered in online course development was "how students would learn best (mode or style)" (p. 26). When students are taught how they learn best, they gain a tool to help promote academic success.

In a study on online MBA students, Gaide (2005) reports that "assessing students' individual learning styles makes it easier to help them understand how to effectively manage their time and fulfill course objectives" (p. 5). Knowing whether they are a kinesthetic, auditory or visual learner is just as important to evaluating the students' path to success in the virtual world as it is in the traditional classroom.

More often than not, classroom assessment and feedback is done through the traditional process of grading and evaluating the student. Examinations and papers provide instructors with the materials to determine the student's understanding of and progress in the academic materials being covered. However, Tinto's research suggests that feedback should occur very early on in the student's academic career, much earlier than midterm examinations. Feedback also needs to happen frequently, much more often than once or twice a semester, in order to allow the student time to make the behavioral adjustments necessary to become more successful. In a study of second and third year undergraduates in the United Kingdom, results suggested that weekly quizzes in class provide the necessary feedback students need, although they emphasize this is

only for immediate knowledge needed and not for deeper learning or mastery of the materials (Haigh, 2007).

Other studies support the notion of frequent and varied feedback in the classroom. In piloting the Assessment for Learning Questionnaire, McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery, and King (2011) found support for what they considered formal feedback (from the instructor or self-assessment systems) and informal feedback (through teacher and peer interactions). This multilevel feedback system led to a more positive experience for the students and deeper learning of the materials.

Feedback is an important part of the classroom experience, and technology now plays a role. Some institutions have begun to use mobile devices or clickers in the classroom so that an instructor can have a question appear as part of the coursework presentation, and students can anonymously answer. When the instructor sees the percentage of students who are answering the question correctly, the instructor can adjust or review the materials as necessary. This method can work well in large classes where it would be more difficult for the instructor to ascertain each individual student's understanding of the materials. Students' receive immediate feedback on how well they understand the material. In addition to using feedback to adjust teaching, Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) describe additional important elements of good feedback from the student perspective as follows:

- Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards)
- Delivers high quality information to students about their learning
- Facilitates self-assessment and reflection in learning
- Encourages high quality information to students about their learning
- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.

Another way in which technology is playing a role in feedback is through the use of e-portfolios. The e-portfolio is the online placement of a project or portfolio of work in any given class. Both instructor and peers have the opportunity to provide constructive criticism on the work. The use of the e-portfolio can become a social and collaborative learning opportunity for students in addition to providing them with the feedback needed. Eynon, Gambino, and Török (2014) and Kahn (2014) both support the use of e-portfolios, indicating that their use contributes to deeper learning, greater achievement, and ultimately course and degree completion. Eynon et al. are part of a community of practice surrounding e-portfolios, Connect to Learning (C2L), which includes at least 24 campuses across the country.

Taking appropriate action after receiving the feedback is what ultimately makes the feedback worthwhile. Tinto (2012) stresses the importance of having an early warning system in place for faculty to share concerns and having the staff ready to act on solving student issues. The feedback is useful only if the college or university is ready with a plan of action and can provide the needed services to assist the student in getting back on track towards classroom success. The use of appropriate and timely feedback works best in contributing to student success when combined with Tinto's other condition of support.

Assessment: Institutional. The last area of assessment involves the institution as a whole and the institutional evaluation process of goal attainment. Large-scale national surveys such as National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement can provide an institution with feedback about programs and student engagement goals. These national surveys attempt to measure high impact practices, most of which share the similar quality of providing frequent and meaningful feedback to the student (NSSE, 2013). These surveys examine student perspectives and self-reported participation in activities and

programs on campus. The survey results published in 2013 indicated that feedback to students varied by discipline, another factor for institutions trying to improve their practices to take into consideration. The surveys also measure support and engagement, two of Tinto's (2012) other factors that create a successful student environment. The 10 engagement indicators grouped into four themes, similar to Tinto's conditions for success, are shown in Figure 4 (NSSE, 2013, p. 8). National surveys, such as NSSE, provide an institution with the opportunity to have an outside, independent source administer and assess institutional goals.

Theme	Engagement Indicators
Academic Challenge	Higher-Order Learning Reflective & Integrative Learning Learning Strategies Quantitative Reasoning
Learning with Peers	Collaborative Learning Discussions with Diverse Others
Experiences with Faculty	Student-Faculty Interaction Effective Teaching Practices
Campus Environment	Quality of Interactions Supportive Environment

Figure 4. Engagement indicators.

Assessment: Summary. Overall, assessment and feedback on the institutional level should be a constant part of any strategic planning. Even if an institution is able to consistently meet its educational goals, new goals will need to be set and evaluated at every level. In particular, before students enter the institution assessment and feedback both in the classroom and at the institutional level are vital to student success.

Condition 4: Involvement or engagement. As Tinto (2012) discusses, greater academic and social engagement leads to greater success in college. When students have more social

affiliations and social support, students tend to have greater involvement in educational activities and learning.

Astin first defined student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Astin's theory and research still remain current in explaining student success in higher education. Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as a representation of "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Harper and Quaye (2008) describe the differences between involvement and engagement, with the latter being more action-oriented, purposeful, and involving collaboration, which then leads to deeper learning and understanding of academic materials.

Several authors recognized that among the challenges of the nontraditional students are their multiple life responsibilities, such as raising families and/or working (Harper & Quaye, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Tinto 2012; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Being fully engaged in their education poses more of a challenge for the adult student with many responsibilities competing for their time. These additional responsibilities lead to less time for interactions outside of the classroom with either faculty or peers, despite both of those interactions leading to more success in the classroom. Tinto (2012) suggests that focusing on classroom-based activities, such as cooperative learning, learning communities, and service learning linked to course work can increase student engagement and overall student success. In this section, I will present some of the more common academic practices that lead to engagement.

Engagement: Orientation and first year programs. The pre-term orientation, which specifically begins and ends prior to the semester in which academic courses start, is only one

type of orientation format that establishes a learning community. Some orientation programs have the student take the orientation program concurrently with some academic coursework over the summer. In another type of orientation, students establish a learning community during the first semester while coursework is taken, but does not begin earlier than other academic counterparts. Orientation learning communities are typically known to last a year. Messineo (2012) demonstrates the institutional recognition of the importance of these programs as 84% of campuses have some form of first-year programming. Positive outcomes, including increased persistence and easing the transition to college, are the reasons so many educational institutions try to establish a learning community through orientations (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1991).

In a study of six community colleges, Visher, Schneider, Wathington, and Collado (2010) found that having students participate in learning cohorts leads to stronger social and academic support among the cohort. Similarly, in a non-traditional college setting, Brown and Burdsal (2012) also found that institutional commitment and student engagement could also be increased by "participating in academically oriented institutional programs like learning communities" (p. 447). Evenbeck and Hamilton (2006) add study abroad opportunities as a way a learning community develops strong engagement between students and the institution as they explore another culture.

Engagement: Cooperative learning and learning communities. Learning communities are sometimes referred to as cohorts; these are composed of students who take two or more classes together in a type of block scheduling. The linking of the courses and instructors can lead to additional support (Tinto 2012). This type of scheduling is often seen in orientation programs or in remedial (basic skills) classes. Engberg and Mayhew (2007) discuss the

influence that the student support and engagement theories have had in changing the way many first-year programs are structured, now typically using cohorts.

Cooperative learning is sometimes also referred to as collaborative learning. Both terms describe the focused and interdependent interactions with classmates or small groups of classmates in order to solve a problem or complete a project. There is much support for the idea that collaborative learning is beneficial to the student as it increases student engagement in the classroom.

In a comprehensive review of the literature on cooperative learning, Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, and Johnson (2005) found the outcomes of cooperative learning can be divided into three major categories: "success, quality of relationships, and psychological adjustment to college life" (p. 91). That is, students who participated in cooperative learning activities found more success in classes and in college, had stronger relationships with faculty and peers, and experienced overall greater engagement with the institution.

Wang (2012) found that a community college students' self-concept increased when they participated in programs that encourage social and academic engagement. He found that these interactions are beneficial in more ways than previously considered. This study was based on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study. The author was able to isolate the data for over 1400 community college students.

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) conducted a study comparing NSSE student data to a parallel study of faculty data. They found that students reported higher engagement when they had faculty who engaged students in more meaningful ways in the classroom, such as collaborative learning activities. Only students whose faculty also participated in the study were

included, as to be able to draw conclusions from both sets of data. Over 20,000 seniors and 20,000 first year students were included. The authors found that "course-related interactions were positively related to a supportive campus environment, interpersonal support, and support for learning" (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 163).

Brown and Burdsal (2012) also used NSSE data and looked at students in a nontraditional college setting. Almost 4000 undergraduates at Wichita State University participated in the study. Wichita State is defined as a commuter campus. The average age of the student body is 25, and one-third of the students attend part time. Brown and Burdsal found that cooperative education was not only a valuable educational activity for this nontraditional campus, but also helped to build the students' institutional commitment.

Developing community and fostering engagement can be more challenging in the online environment. Hege (2011) shares his experiences developing a community of learners as an online instructor for second-year theology students. These experiences mostly include online blogging where students had to post their own thoughts on a weekly reading and comment on others' posts. Final course evaluations indicated that students found this assignment helped to deepen their understanding of the material, and foster online engagement through the conversations developed in the blog posts.

In another study conducted with online students, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) found that the biggest contributor to developing community was the sharing of resources among students. When students shared information, documents, or techniques, those actions developed trust and engagement among the group. Students surveyed ranked this cooperative activity as highly important in an online course.

Engagement: Service learning. Service learning is, as it sounds, the use of a volunteer activity in order to promote deeper learning in the classroom. As cited by Webber, Krylow, and Zhang (2013), "According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), service-learning experiences can positively contribute to a student's cognitive skills and intellectual growth. In addition, there is evidence that when a service experience is incorporated into academic course work, it is possible for comprehension of the subject matter to increase" (p. 594). In addition, this is consistent with Serow and Dreyden's (1990) study, which found that students who participated in community service projects earned higher grade point averages.

Other benefits of service learning have also been supported by research. Astin and Sax (1998) found that service learning as part of an academic course has a positive relationship with the students' "leadership ability, commitment to serving the community, planning to do volunteer work in the future, planning to work in a community service organization, commitment to influencing social values, commitment to participating in a community action program, understanding of problems facing the community, and satisfaction with college opportunities for community service, and understanding of problems facing the nation" (p. 261). In addition to all these benefits, McKay and Estrella (2008) also add the importance of the student-faculty interaction that takes place before, during, and after the service learning activity as another way to engage the student.

Vaknin and Bresciani (2013) conducted a comparative study specifically focused on service learning programs at community colleges. The authors describe service learning as connecting academics to the neighborhoods around them. They found that when the service opportunity was clearly linked to the academic activity and when students had the opportunity to reflect on the experience, learning outcomes increased. Hayward (2014) also suggested that the

service learning opportunity not only helps the college develop a positive image in the community, but the experience of service learning also helps the student prepare for the work environment in a real-world setting.

Engagement: Summary. The importance of developing opportunities for engagement and subsequent effects of engagement cannot be stressed enough. Ben-Avie et al. (2012) describe how students can become more motivated toward achievement through positive interactions with adults and peers. The authors suggest working with faculty who value a love of learning fosters an emotional attachment to learning and success as well.

Webber et al. (2013) detail "when students actively participate in curricular and co-curricular events, they make friends, become oriented to campus quickly, get to know faculty members, and make important gains in critical thinking" (p. 591). The authors proclaim student engagement to be an important factor in students' academic and social successes in college.

Further supporting the importance of engagement is the study of NSSE data by Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008). Their study had two main findings. First, the authors found that student engagement was positively related to first year students' grades, and their persistence to the second-year. Secondly, these effects of engagement were even more meaningful for academically weaker students and ethnic or racial minorities as compared to their Caucasian counterparts. While the authors report these compensatory findings are not new (Kuh, 2007), the importance of engagement is stressed even more for any at risk population, including the nontraditional student.

Summary

The four conditions of student success are expectations, support, engagement, and feedback. While each of these has been shown to be important for student success, Tinto (2012)

believes that the interaction among the four conditions also contributes to student success. The majority of the literature is based on traditional undergraduate students, but these students are no longer the majority of the students attending college. More research needs to be done to see how these conditions affect the experience of nontraditional students. In addition, students who are attending online courses will have different experiences then residential students. More research can help ascertain the experiences of nontraditional students taking courses online and the effects of the conditions for success on their experience.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in an online undergraduate bachelor's degree program and their perceptions of the student success conditions. This study will investigate students' perception of how Tinto's four conditions of student success influenced their university experience. This is a qualitative study that gathered data and sought to explore themes that emerged from the students' description of their experience. The majority of research and publications on student retention and student success are based on experiences of traditional undergraduate student populations attending residential, liberal arts colleges and universities. Only recently have studies begun to address the varying needs of the nontraditional or adult student population. Community colleges have long served this population and have been a gateway to enrollment at 4-year colleges. Little research has examined the adult student experience pursuing the bachelor's degree at universities. Despite research indicating nontraditional students aged 25 and older make up at least three-quarters of all students attending college, very little published research speaks to their experience (Laitinen, 2013; Tinto, 2012).

The chapter continues with a description and overview of the methods including setting and sampling of subjects. Next, the data-gathering instrument, as well as the reliability and validity of the instrument will be described. This chapter will then continue with a review of the techniques used in gathering and analyzing data. Finally, the last section of the chapter explains how the researcher ensures the protection of human subjects, in conjunction with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do nontraditional students perceive institutional conditions of student success while enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program?

- How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?
- How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?
- What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?
- How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of student success from students of different sociodemographic, age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds?

Research Design

Epistemology is "concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the world and focuses on issues such as how we can learn about reality and what forms the basis of our knowledge" (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014, p. 6). The epistemological framework is a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Creswell (2009) states that the goal of social constructivist worldview research "is to rely as much as possible on the participants views of the situation being studied" (p. 8). According to Crotty (1998), in the constructivist perspective "understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9).

Based on this epistemology, a qualitative methodology was chosen since the purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the student experience. According to Golafshani (2003), qualitative research is most appropriate when the researcher attempts methods to seek illumination and understanding of a specific context or real world setting. Creswell (2009)

described qualitative research as a way to explore and deepen understanding of the meanings in complex situations. The researcher seeks to understand the nontraditional student experience as it is lived, with the understanding that each student's experience is unique. In a social constructivist worldview, "the more open ended questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). In a qualitative design, data collection and analysis should lead to emergence of themes that should help contribute to the research in higher education.

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for studies where there is a "lack of theory and previous research" (Creswell, 1994, p. 146). As stated, there is a void in the research that examines student success conditions of nontraditional students participating in online education at 4-year institutions. According to Creswell (1994), qualitative methodology is appropriate when "a need exists to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop theory" (p. 146). This study will attempt to develop a theory on the educational success of the nontraditional students using Tinto's four conditions of success and their perceived impact.

Harper (2007) specifically discusses the importance of qualitative inquiry when researching the lived student experience. He suggests that students may take several surveys throughout their college career without ever being asked to describe, in their own words, what has impacted their college experience. Harper (2007) states that research on the student experience obtained almost exclusively through quantitative approaches provides an incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice. More problematic is that researchers do not seek opportunities to hear student reflections on what they learned and the ways that programs, interventions, and people added value to their lives and

educational trajectories (p. 56). Harper stresses that the purpose of qualitative research is to provide rich, deep descriptions of the experience being studied.

This qualitative study used the principles of phenomenology to guide the research process. Phenomenology seeks to "identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). As a result, the researcher chose phenomenology as the most appropriate methodology to explore the research questions. Moustakas (1994) indicates, "the method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience" (p. 47). This research will provide a description of how nontraditional students in an online program experience their education.

Phenomenology has been defined as "how individuals make sense of the world around them" (Bryman, 2012, p. 714). In the phenomenological process, Richards and Morse (2013) suggest that there are two main assumptions:

> The first is that perceptions present us with evidence of the world- not as it is thought to be but as it is lived. The lived world, or *lived experience,* is critical to phenomenology. The second assumption is that human existence is meaningful and of interest in the sense that we are always conscious of something. Existence as *being in the world* is a phenomenological phrase acknowledging that people are in their worlds and are understandable only in their contexts. (p. 68)

In the phenomenological method, "perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52). This study seeks to secure a rich description of the students' perception of their experiences.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described the purpose of phenomenology to "investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomenon as described by research participants" (p. 32). The researcher interacted with the participants through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A and B) in order to fully understand the reality of the student experience. The researcher's interaction with the participants is important to the qualitative methodology (Creswell, 1994). Through the interaction, the participants provide "rich, context-bound information leading to patterns or theories that help explain a phenomenon" (Creswell, 1994, p. 7).

In qualitative research, the researcher is "the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Creswell, 1994, p. 145). This principal researcher is an experienced professional in student services for more than 20 years and currently is employed at the institution where the research will be conducted. As such, this provided the principal researcher with the background and knowledge to use informed questions (and follow-up questions when needed) during the interview process. In addition, the principal researcher has experience as a student in a hybrid degree program in which online courses had a face-to-face meeting component. The researcher had a positive experience in the hybrid program, but recognizes the experience will not be the same for everyone as many factors influence student success. Harper (2007) implores that the "students' experiences are far too rich and instructive to overlook" (p. 66) as the college student is in the best position to offer their perspective on how they were affected by success conditions in their learning environment.

This study seeks to understand and describe the lived experience of nontraditional online students. The goal of this study is to provide better understanding of the experiences and needs of the nontraditional student, which can provide student services professionals with information

to evaluate institutional programs geared towards student success and retention. “Qualitative methods can reveal aspects of student learning and development that enable institutions to be more effective and efficient” (Harper, 2007, p. 66).

Sources of Data

Population. The study setting is a large, private university in the New York City area. The university has an undergraduate enrollment of almost 26,000 students in all schools within the university. The 4-year graduation for the institution rate exceeds 80%. The university is comprised of several schools, the one school selected in this study is known for adult programs with online class offerings. This setting was chosen because of the institutional reputation for providing working, adult students with educational opportunities. This school also offered two fully online bachelor’s degrees at the time of the study, with plans to add more fully online degrees in the future. The researcher works in one of the other schools within the university and has a positive relationship with the administration at the school where this study takes place.

Sampling and recruitment. The administration of this school assisted the researcher in recruiting participants for this study by emailing the students the “recruitment of participants” email (Appendix C). Administration agreed to email students to request volunteers for the study as the preferred method instead of allowing the researcher full access to student email lists. The email sent by administration provided participants with a description of the research process, purpose of the study, and the researchers’ direct contact information for additional information and/or for students to indicate their willingness to participate. The researcher expected the research to be of minimal disruption to students, and interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Once students reached out to the researcher about possible participation, each student was sent the informed consent and scheduled for an interview at a mutually convenient time, either by

phone, online chat software (such as Google chat or Skype) or in person (when geographically feasible and preferred by the participant).

Emails to recruit participants were sent by the institution at two different times, several months apart, at the request of the researcher. During the recruitment of participants, only two possible participants originally contacted the researcher, but then did not follow through with interviews. The researcher contacted these non-respondents three times by email in an attempt to still have them participate in the study. When these possible participants did not respond to the additional requests, the researcher ceased contact.

Sample. The participants were purposefully selected using a criterion-based sampling to ensure all participants meet specific criteria. In this case, the participants were all nontraditional (adult) students enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program at a large, private, urban university. While several students met other criteria to define them as a nontraditional student, age (at least 24 years old) and enrollment in an online degree program were the main criteria for inclusion in the study. This sample is a purposeful one, as is typical in qualitative research according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012). At the time of this study, the institution was offering two online bachelor's degree programs, a B.A. in Social Sciences with a concentration in Organizational Behavior and Change and the B.S. in Leadership and Management Studies.

The sample will not further be confined or limited by any factor except online degree enrollment and age; participants will have to be 24 or older. Students were asked about demographics and other factors that may have influenced their educational experience, but will not be excluded from the study because of any factor. Students were also given the option to skip or omit any demographic question they did not wish to answer. The 15 participants ranged

in age from 30 to 58 years old. Knowing the student background will be helpful as this information will contribute to a better explanation of their full, lived experience.

Data Collection Strategy

As the researcher attempted to gather rich data about the participants lived experiences, the data collection strategy, as shown in Figure 6, included the following:

Informed consent. The informed consent form (see Appendix D) provided each participant with information about the purpose of the study. Informed consent informs the participants about their confidentiality, voluntary status, and ability to withdraw from the study at any time. All students were provided an informed consent prior to participating in the research. The informed consent was included in the "recruitment of participants" email from the institution. The researcher then set up an in person, phone, or Skype interview at the participants' convenience, and emailed each participant another copy of the informed consent procedures. While a waiver of documentation of informed consent has been granted by IRB to protect participant confidentiality (see Appendix E), the informed consent was still reviewed verbally.

Sociodemographic data survey. In the first phase, participants were asked to answer a brief sociodemographic survey that included questions about age, gender, and ethnicity. Demographic data was collected to determine the factors outside of school that may impact their success. The researcher asked these demographic questions of each participant, according to the participant convenience, by phone, by Skype, or in person. This survey can be found in Appendix B.

Interviews. Also in the first phase of the study, participants were asked to participate in the primary research interview. They were given the option not to continue after the

sociodemographic data survey, in case anyone changed their mind at that time. If they persisted, which all did, these interviews were conducted immediately following the sociodemographic data survey questions. It was expected that this interview would last about 60 minutes. In reality, the interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews provided deep, rich information about the experiences and perceptions of participants. The researcher took 6 months to interview the participants. The interview script can be found in Appendix A.

Documents. In order to have an additional data source to verify or dispute the findings, the researcher also reviewed printed and online materials including the institutional website, with its admissions and registration information, support services, and online course descriptions. The researcher was also able to gain access to four-course syllabi from online courses taught in one semester. The four syllabi were in varying subjects, Business Law, World Cultures-Asia, History (Renaissance to Revolution) and Organizational Behavior. These sources provide the researcher with additional information as experienced by the student. It is possible that these sources have influenced perceptions of the nontraditional online student experience. If so, they will contribute to a richer description of the lived experience. See Figure 5.

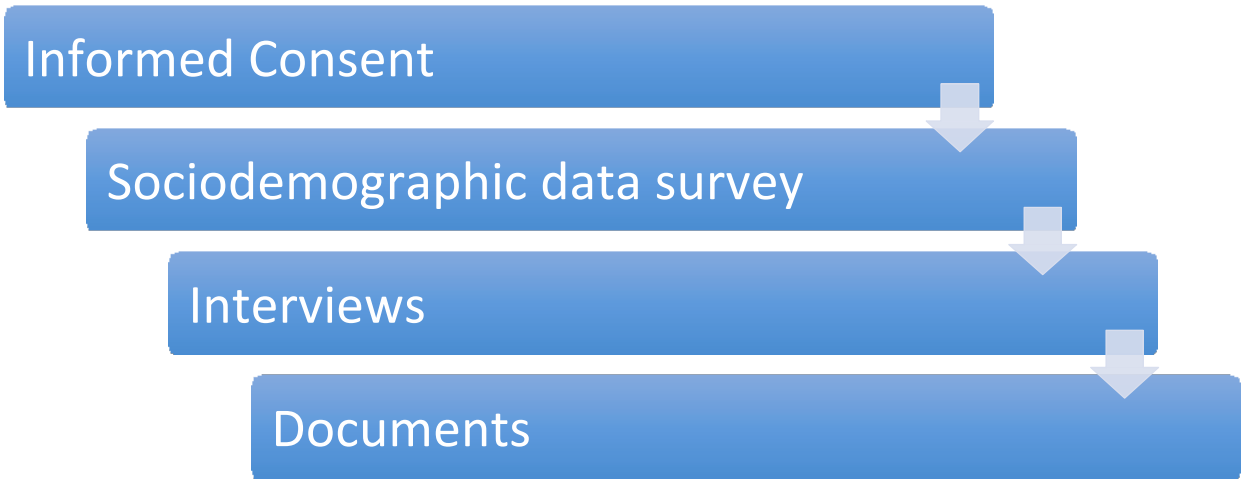

Figure 5. The data collection sources for this study.

Instruments

The tools were usability tested prior to data collection by performing a pilot study with a small student sample (approximately three students). Students were asked to complete the informed consent, the sociodemographic data survey, and then an interview with the researcher. In addition to completing the survey and interview, these students were asked if they understood the materials presented or if any questions were confusing or misleading. Each participant's responses were carefully reviewed to see if the questions were clear to the student. Since it appeared that the questions are providing rich data, no adjustments to the survey were made and all questions were asked of future participants. No questions appeared confusing or misleading, and since many also included follow-up and clarifying questions, there was no need to make additional revisions for clarity.

During the data collection phase, emails were sent to students enrolled in the online degree programs requesting their participation. Participating subjects were given an informed consent to read and review, and the form was reviewed verbally with each individual to ensure their understanding. The IRB allowed the researcher to obtain informed consent verbally as to protect participant confidentiality. Without a signed informed consent form, no paperwork with participants' real identity would exist. Once informed consent was obtained verbally, the demographic survey and semi-structured interview were used to gather additional information about the students' lived experience. As themes emerged from the data, the researcher asked additional questions for deeper understanding and clarification of the online students' experiences. In addition, questions were asked more specifically about each participants experience with the success conditions. Table 1 shows a summary of the supporting literature found in each of the success condition categories.

Table 1

Research Question 1 and Supporting Literature

RQs	Supporting literature
How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?	Dalziel and Payne (2001), Eynon, Gambino, and Török (2014), Gaide (2005), Haigh (2007), Hoyt and Sorensen (2001), Kahn (2014), Lorenzetti (2002, 2005, 2006), McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery, and King (2011), National Survey of Student Engagement (2013), Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006), O'Gara et al. (2009), Robinson et al. (1996), Smyth and Lodge (2012), Tallman and Fitzgerald (2005), Tinto (2012)
How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?	Bandura and Locke (2003), Bean and Eaton (2001), Bozarth, Chapman and LaMonica (2004), Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995), Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2009), Charles, Roscigno, and Torres (2007), Chickering and Kytle (1999), Cho (2012), Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, and Santos Laanan (2013), Cole and Korkmaz (2010), Dewitz, Devonport and Lane (2006), Jugdev & Hutchison (2004), Kreig (2013), Mayhew, Vanderlinden, and Kim (2010), McCann, Immel, Kadah-Ammeter, and Priniski (2013), Perry and Pilati (2011), Reason (2009), Seifert et al. (2010), Woosley, and Walsh (2009), Tinto (2012), Torenbeek, Jansen, and Hofman (2010), van der Meer, Jansen and Torenbeek (2010)
What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?	Ali and Leeds (2009), Bean and Eaton (2001), Bell, Gass, Nafziger, and Starbuck (2014), Blumenstyk (2011), Braxton and Lee (2005), Campbell and Campbell (2007), Campbell, Smith, Dugan, and Komives (2012), Carruth, et al. (2010), Crisp and Cruz (2009), Davidson (2013), Devonport and Lane (2006), Donahue and Tibbits (1946), Endres et al. (2009), Jessup-Anger (2011), Kuh, Schuh et al. (1991), Lorenzetti, (2002), McKinney and Novak (2013), Messineo, (2012), O'Gara et al. (2009), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Reason (2009), Robinson et al. (1996), Santa Rita and Bacote (1991), Scagnoli (2001), Schaefer (2010), Strayhorn and Saddler (2009), Tinto (2012), Trevino (2006)
How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?	Astin (1984), Astin and Sax (1998), Ben-Avie et al. (2012), Brown and Burdsal (2012), Engberg and Mayhew (2007), Evenbeck and Hamilton (2006), Harper and Quaye (2008), Haywar (2014), Hege (2011), Jessup-Anger (2011), Kuh (2007), Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008), McKay and Estrella (2008), Messineo, (2012), Park and Choi (2009), Santa Rita and Bacote (1991), Serow and Dreyden's (1990), Shackelford and Maxwell (2012), Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, and Johnson (2005), Tinto (2012), Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), Webber, Krylow and Zhang (2013), Vaknin and Bresciani (2013), Visher, Schneider, Wathington, and Collado (2010), Wang (2012), Yoo and Huang (2013)

General questions about each of the success conditions were asked along with probing questions when needed. The researcher interviewed 15 students over 6 months in order to obtain the data saturation needed to have enough rich data to describe the phenomenon of the nontraditional online student experience at this institution.

The interview tool was developed around the research on the student success conditions, as reviewed in Chapter 2. Using the research to develop the tool provides face validity. In addition, validity will be established through adherence to the research protocol. The interview protocol included collecting data on each participant's perception and experience with each of the success conditions (expectations, support, feedback, and engagement). Questions were followed with probing questions to gain richer data to describe their full experiences.

Human Subjects Consideration

The researcher followed the process and procedures for the protection of human subjects in accordance with the Pepperdine University, Graduate and Professional Schools' Institutional Review Board. The researcher did not begin recruitment, obtaining informed consent, or collecting of any data, without prior approval of the Institutional Review Board. All participants reviewed and verbally confirmed understanding of the Informed Consent found in Appendix D, adapted from Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), before any further data was collected. Some of the online students were not in geographic proximity to the University, so the form was emailed to each participant. The researcher answered questions and clarified material on the form, as necessary. In the initial meeting (online, by phone, or in person) the informed consent was verbally reviewed. The researcher clearly reviewed the purpose of the research and the participant right to withdraw at any time and without any penalty. The researcher also reminded participants of their ability to skip or omit any question they did not want to answer. The

researcher also secured permission to audio record interviews. The researcher attempted to minimize any possible risk to any participant, and acknowledged the human subjects concerns. In order to protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used and all data collected (audio files and transcripts) is stored electronically in a password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded by the primary researcher, but transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Should a participant not want to be recorded, which occurred with two participants, the researcher had to rely solely on their interview notes. The researcher expected that by protecting the participants' confidentiality in the interviews, that most participants would permit recording to take place. One student did not consent to audio recording and one student was not recorded since they were walking on noisy city streets at the time of the interview. The researcher was concerned about the audio quality and decided not to record but just take notes. Overall, 13 out of 15 consented to being audio recorded. The transcriptionist only knows the participants by their pseudonym, which the researcher used during the audio recordings as to protect confidentiality. The professional transcriptions were reviewed by the primary researcher while listening to the primary recording to verify accuracy of the data against any notes taken during the interviews. No errors were found.

Once confirmed that no errors existed, the coding of the interviews began. The traditional approach to coding as defined by Creswell (2009) is to "allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis" (p. 187). That is, there will not be predetermined codes, but the researcher allowed the themes to emerge organically from the data. The interviews were coded as they were completed and each transcription returned to the researcher. Coding happened continuously until all interviews were complete and coded. By using this process, interpretation

of some results could happen earlier and clarify any questions that are not providing the rich data needed to describe the student experience.

The researcher chose a phenomenological approach to the study, which seeks to "identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). As a result, the researcher chose to code the interviews according to the experiences with each of the success conditions and then further code based on positive or negative experiences overall. As Creswell (2009) suggests, data analysis included expected codes, "based on past literature and common sense" (p. 186), as well as unusual, surprising, or interesting codes that emerged.

As the interviews were completed and transcribed, they were reviewed for themes that emerged from the data. The questions centered on the success conditions, so it was expected that themes within each of these categories would emerge. The researcher did all coding in order to provide consistency in the coding. Constant coding continued as more data was gathered. The researcher coded initially from interview notes and then from the professional transcriptions in word documents.

Then, the researcher coded the interview transcriptions using the computer software NVivo (version 11), a product of QSR International, to assist in the coding process. Richards and Morse (2013) describe many advantages of using coding software, especially effective storage of the data and being able to easily and quickly retrieve data. The researcher coded initially using each of the success conditions as a theme. Two additional coding nodes (as coding themes or categories are called in NVivo) were later added in each success condition to be able to easily identify positive and negative experiences. All interviews were reviewed again and coded again with these additional data points. Creswell (2009) suggests that computer

software also has the advantage of having built in reliability programs to check the consistency of coding. In all, each interview was reviewed five to six times to ensure all data was coded. The data, which has no identifying factors associated with it, is protected in a password-protected computer.

Trustworthiness

According to Creswell (1994), "determining the accuracy of the account, discussing the generalizability of it, and advancing possibilities of replicating a study have long been considered the scientific evidence of a scholarly study" (p. 157). In every study, a researcher must consider issues of reliability and validity and attempt to minimize their effects on study outcomes.

Thyer (2001) defines the reliability of a qualitative study as the degree to which other researchers performing the same study would produce the same results. Reliability can be increased through careful description of the proposed methodology as well as thorough field notes describing the process as it occurs. Field notes are important to address any anomalies that may unexpectedly occur in the interview process. In this research, no real anomaly occurred with the data, but one interviewee was walking on the street with a lot of background noise. The researcher did not record this interview anticipating the poor recording quality, and instead relied on field notes.

The process to develop the research questions and attempts to norm the questions before recorded interviews with participants have already been discussed. Participants were asked questions in two different phases of the interviews (first open ended demographic questions, then oral semi-structured interviews). The purpose of the two phases is to increase reliability of the respondents' answers, establish trust in the primary researcher, and minimize any perceived

socially desirable responses (Thyer, 2001). In addition, reliability in the coding of the data has already been discussed. To review, the researcher used constant coding as well as coding software to improve consistency and minimize any reliability issues in the coding of interviews.

To stay close to the data and increase internal validity, Thyer (2001) indicates "qualitative researchers usually support their inferential statements about the data with exact quotes from research participants" (p. 277). The discussion of the results in Chapter 4 will include direct quotes from the interviews, as the participants passionately, and sometimes bluntly, described their experiences. Creswell (2009) also suggests that internal validity can be increased through the triangulation of different sources. As such, this study will review participant oral statements, transcribed interviews, and online documents to ensure validity.

As the final step in the data analysis, the study was reviewed to validate the findings and show trustworthiness (Schaefer, 2010). Thyer (2001) also defines validity as the credibility of the study findings. Multiple strategies will be used to verify the conclusions drawn from the data. Thyer suggests that there are three main threats to validity: reactivity, researcher bias or participant bias. Reactivity is the effect that a researcher may have by being in the field. Since this research study did not include field observations, reactivity was unlikely to be a threat to this study's validity. However, it is possible that biases would be an issue.

Researcher bias has already been partially discussed in that the researcher has experience in student services and as an online student. The positive experiences of the researcher could manifest as optimistically biased. This bias will be mitigated by fully reporting the student experience not only positive student experiences, but negative ones as well. The phenomenological methodology that seeks to describe the experience in full, rich detail requires that all data (positive and negative) be reported.

Participant biases can occur when the participant exaggerates, leaves out, or forgets to include information in the study. Participants, who cannot remember details, are assured that their honesty will be most beneficial to the study. Instructions in the surveys ask participants to complete the information as accurately as possible. In addition, participants were reminded that they do not have to answer every question, and that their class standing, grades or any academic status will not be affected by refusal to participate or refusal to answer any question.

Thyer (2001) also explains "qualitative researchers rely on analytic generalization (which focuses on the generalizability of findings from one case to the next) rather than on probabilistic generalization used in quantitative studies (which focuses on generalizing findings from a sample to a population)" (p. 281). The generalizability of qualitative research may be seen as a limitation of the research (Chen, 2014). The findings, which provide a rich description of these students' experiences, may not generalize to all students. The sample size is small and is specific to the experiences at one university.

Summary

This chapter describes the methodology and process for collecting the data needed to describe the lived experiences of the nontraditional online student, with the utmost care given to human subjects' consideration. IRB approval has been obtained and the data collected, coded and analyzed. This research report will continue with Chapter 4, a report on the key findings and themes that emerged from the data. In Chapter 5, the researcher will discuss the findings in the context of describing the phenomenon of the nontraditional online student in rich detail. Chapter 5 will also address the findings as compared to the literature and suggestions for how these results could impact higher education practice for the future.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in an online undergraduate bachelor's degree program and their perceptions of the student success conditions. This study seeks to understand and describe the conditions that influence student success (expectations, support, engagement and feedback) for nontraditional bachelor's students enrolled in college online classes. This study has been guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do nontraditional students perceive institutional conditions of student success while enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program?

- How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?
- How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?
- What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?
- How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of student success conditions from students of different sociodemographic, age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds?

Chapter 4 will review the findings on the student experiences with each of the success conditions in Research Question 1. The findings will be presented through the themes that emerged from the data about each of the success conditions. Research Question 2 sought to answer if demographic differences had an impact on the perceptions of the students' experience. The themes that emerged from the data will also answer this question.

The themes emerged when coding the professional transcriptions of the interviews, as described in Chapter 3. The data produced three overarching themes related to each of the success conditions:

1. Nontraditional students identified in an asynchronous online environment did not find the success conditions to be consistently present and reported that they would have benefitted from them if they had existed both academically and socially.
2. Nontraditional students identified key elements for success. These included flexibility in their schedule and the opportunity to receive a degree from a reputable institution that would lead to career enhancement.
3. Students reported developing a strong, productive, and positive academic relationship with their advisor. The advisor served as a substitute for the traditional faculty-student relationships and was the primary role for providing academic, social, and financial support.

The results of this research offer a comprehensive description of the success conditions in the nontraditional online student experience. Each of these themes will be described in greater detail as well as the data that led to the discovery of each them. First, the chapter continues with a review of the data about the participants themselves.

Participants

The current study secured 15 participants, all over the age of 24 and enrolled in (or recently graduated from) an online bachelor's degree program at one school within a large private university. Two of the 15 participants had already graduated. Others ranged from being in their second semester to being within two semesters of graduating. Students described the degree program at this particular institution as consisting of online courses that are offered asynchronously, so students are never all logged in at the same time as other students in the program and can complete assignments at their own convenience. The asynchronous

environment is an important factor in the student experience and will be discussed further in the key findings.

The interviews took place over 6 months, from August 2015 to January 2016. The student demographic data is provided in Table 2 in order of the interview date, from oldest (first) to most recent (last). Students were all asked to choose a pseudonym to protect confidentiality, so their real names are not listed in the study. The only existing identifying information would be emails from the student responding to the invitation to participate, which will be kept 3 years on a password protected computer and in a password protected email account. In addition, students were reminded of the informed consent procedures, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could skip any question they did not wish to answer. As a result, a few demographic data questions were not answered (N/A in Table 2), but the experiences of the students are still relevant to the current study.

The gender of the 15 students was split with seven participants reported as male (M) and eight as female (F). For ethnicity, seven students reported as White/Caucasian (C), six as black/African American (A), one Hispanic/Latin (H), and one preferred not to answer (N/A).

For employment status, 13 of the 15 were working full time (FT) at least 40 hours a week while attending school. One student reported volunteering (V) and one student reported being self-employed (SE), but considered that part-time work (below 40 hours a week). The importance of career advancement to this group of participants will be reviewed in a key finding of this chapter, as seeking job advancement opportunities was a primary motivator for this group of students. During the collection of the demographic data, participants were also asked their primary reason for seeking the degree. Thirteen of the 15 specifically mentioned career opportunities for advancement.

In response to their marital status, five students reported being married (M), eight reported as single (S) and two as separated from their spouse (SE). Seven students reported having at least one dependent child (Y) living at home that they financially support, while eight students reported having no children (N). Students were also asked about their enrollment status. Of the 15, one answer was not recorded (N/A), six attended full time (FT) with three to four classes per semester and eight attended part time (PT) with two classes per semester.

Table 2

Participants Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race / ethnicity	Employment status	Marital status	Dependents	Enrollment status
Michael	39	M	C	FT	M	Y	PT
Christopher	37	M	C	FT	S	N	PT
Michelle	32	F	H	FT	S	N	PT
Chris	44	M	AA	FT	S	N	PT
Ruben	32	M	AA	V	S	Y	FT
Terry	39	M	C	FT	M	N	FT
Lynn	33	F	C	FT	SE	N	N/A
Hannan	49	M	C	FT	SE	Y	PT
Alice	58	F	C	PT	M	N	PT
Alexis	30	F	AA	FT	M	Y	FT
Scotty	31	M	C	FT	S	N	PT
Nicole	36	F	AA	FT	M	Y	FT
Aisha	33	F	AA	FT	S	N	PT
Sanchez	39	F	N/A	FT	S	Y	FT
Sharice	43	F	AA	FT	S	Y	FT

Overall, this participant group was fairly diverse in gender and ethnicity. They shared other characteristics typical of the nontraditional student- working full time and having family responsibilities while balancing the academic tasks necessary to be successful each semester. Of the participant group, 6 of the 15 meet three aspects of being a nontraditional student (age, working, dependents) with eight others meeting at least two of the three aspects.

Using the NVivo software, reports were generated through constant coding and then aggregating the data, comparing the number of coded responses to the demographic data. Each interview was coded for each success condition's component according to Tinto's work, but also coded a second time to determine if the comment was a positive or negative experience. The purpose of the second coding was that the researcher hoped to gain an overall sense of positive and negative experiences as well as being able to compare these categories across demographics (see Appendix F, G, H, & I). The key themes that emerged from the data, and the answers to the research questions, are presented below.

Key Findings for Research Question 1

The research suggests that students view their education more positively and perform better when certain conditions are present. Tinto's (2012) research examined the positive impact of providing students with clear expectations, support, engagement, and feedback. This study sought to determine how nontraditional students experienced these success conditions in their online environment. Tinto's success conditions are presented in the context of the key themes that emerged from the data.

Theme 1. Nontraditional students identified in an asynchronous online environment did not find the success conditions to be consistently present and reported that they would have benefitted from them if they had existed both academically and socially.

The interviews revealed an educational environment that differed greatly from the research about traditional face-to-face undergraduate education. Subjects described an online educational environment that had limited interaction with faculty, staff and peers, minimal academic support and feedback (assessments prior to the start of their education, support services, and consistent feedback) and solely asynchronous classroom pedagogy. The data revealed a lack of institutional structures that provide students with academic support such as a formal orientation or academic tutoring centers or an advising center. When students were questioned about Tinto's success conditions (expectations, support, engagement, assessment/feedback), students reported not consistently experiencing the type of pedagogical practices and environment that incorporates these practices. Students also reported frustration and confusion when the success conditions were not present. See Figure 6.

Figure 6. Overall coding summary from NVivo.

Assessment. Tinto (2012) suggests that using entry assessments can help the institution determine the appropriate course level placement, but also provide support to students who may require additional remediation. The entry level placements also help to set up a student for success by not placing them in a course, often a required English or math class, that is too difficult for them. Tinto also states that some entry placement tests have been used as a predictor of attrition. These assessments can then be used to involve faculty, staff, and student services to provide the student with the services needed to prevent attrition. Participants in this study revealed that students did not recall receiving pre-entry assessments or a formal orientation. Out of the 1049 total coded comments using NVivo, the coding resulted in 157 total comments coded regarding feedback and assessment and 19 specific comments about receiving assessment upon entry.

In reviewing the results on assessment upon entry, the majority of participants reported they were not given entrance placement tests (13 out of 15), or online computer proficiency exams (14 out of 15). Only two students remembered taking entrance placement tests and only one student recalled taking a computer proficiency test before enrolling in online college classes. One of the students, Michael, expressed frustration and some disbelief over this experience, stating, "they didn't ask if I knew how to use a computer." Hannan also said, "It is a bit tricky and confusing to get started … I have to admit I do come from an IT background, so I know how to navigate and I would never admit to not being able to do it." Scotty thought he remembered watching "a video that they provided us as far as like a walkthrough of how to use the system. And the system was a little bit confusing, I can definitely admit that. It wasn't the easiest system to use." Since the online learning management system is the medium by which all academic

interactions occur, such as weekly forum postings as well as where assignments are uploaded and submitted, successfully navigating the system is crucial to the success of these students.

This finding was supported by a review of the syllabi. Little information about using the online systems was found in the course syllabi. Only one of the four syllabi reviewed included a direct link to instructions in how to use the online learning management system. Upon review of the website, information is available if a student is able to navigate to the page about online degree offerings to then get to the page about systems requirements. The primary researcher found this form of support difficult to access and cumbersome.

An additional best practice of the student assessment and feedback experience is the ability to participate in institutional assessments. In this program, students have the opportunity to assess the institution in end-of-year course evaluations. The NVivo coding resulted in 19 comments specific to these institutional assessments. Tinto (2012) believes institutional assessments can also lead to making improvements in student retention. When subjects were asked about institutional assessment and feedback, almost every participant (80%) referred to the end-of-year course evaluations. Michael, Michelle and Sanchez knew about them, but didn't know what the follow up would be or if it mattered. Students who were aware of the end of semester course evaluation did complete the evaluations. Although students participated in the evaluations, it was evident they did not know much about the purpose and use of the evaluations. Participants were unaware of who received the results or what impact their feedback might have. See Figure 7.

Despite not knowing the purpose, half of the students (seven of 15) thought the institutional course evaluations were an important experience. In support of Tinto's theory, students believed their opinions were important to the professor and to the school.

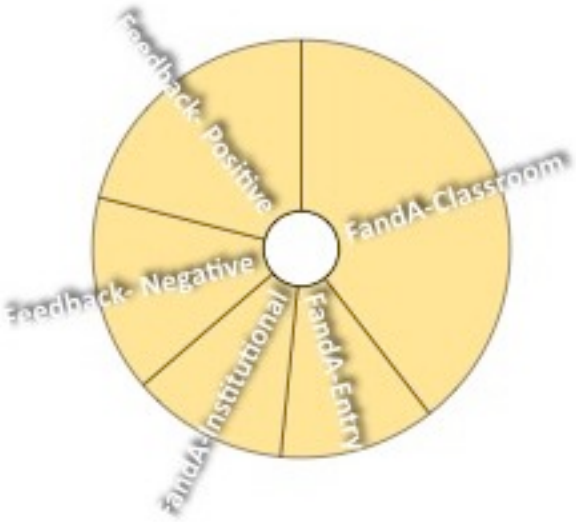

Figure 7. Feedback and assessment coding visual from NVivo.

Aisha, Christopher, Hannan, and Chris believed the professors relied on the evaluations and surmised their feedback on these evaluations might help professors make improvements. Nicole and Ruben mentioned how thorough the evaluations were and that they ask a lot of good questions about the course, professors, and books, but they didn't know specifically who received the results. Sharice was confident that the professors were aware of the course evaluation results, "I know they do for sure, because they bring it up." However, there was no information about the process or purpose of the end-of-year course evaluations neither in any syllabus, nor on the website. Tinto (2012) stresses the importance of institutional assessments, as "the data they provide can lead to institutional improvements in student success" (loc. 1282). The nontraditional students seemed very interested in being able to take part in this evaluation process. Most seemed to believe it was important that they contribute to the evaluation of their education, even though there was no description or purpose explicitly shared with them.

While the literature defines best practices in areas of assessment and feedback, the students interviewed did not find best practices in place. Subjects were frequently unaware of the practice itself, since they had not experienced it. Inconsistencies remain in all areas of the feedback and assessment success conditions, as evidenced in Figure 8.

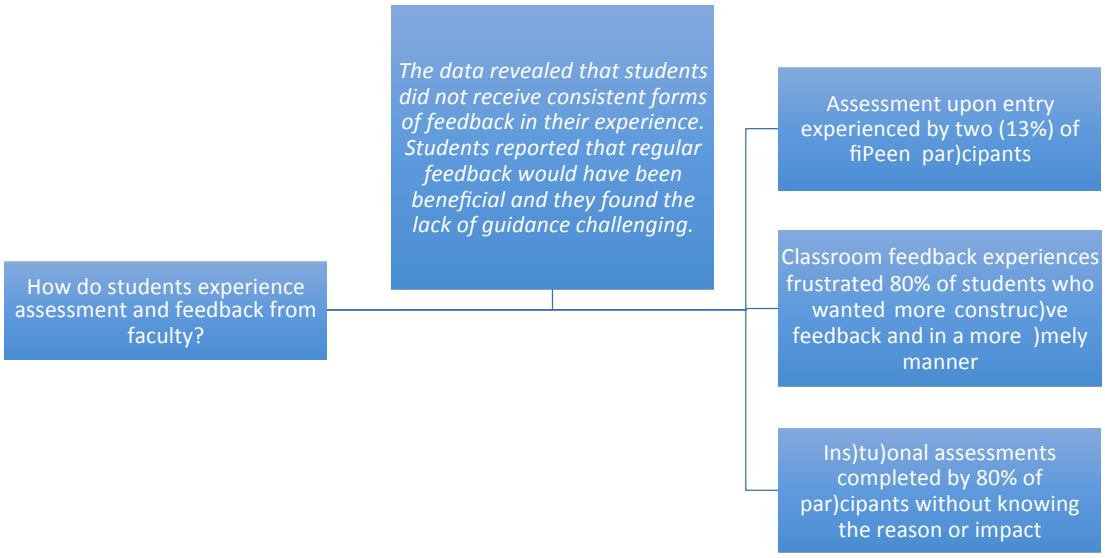

Figure 8. Summary of success condition feedback and assessment with supporting findings.

Assessment upon entry and institutional assessments were reported to be inconsistent and not clearly explained to the student. Students were not always aware of the types of assessments the researcher inquired about and they often seemed unsure about the importance of what they might have been missing. Yet, subjects described the end of semester course assessments they did participate in as mostly a positive experience, perhaps since this was one of the few assessment practices they experienced and could answer the researcher's questions.

Feedback. When examining classroom feedback, best practice standard includes feedback that is consistent, constructive, and/or given in a timely manner. Participants interviewed were asked about different types of feedback provided at the course level by faculty.

Tinto (2012) clearly states that while other forms of assessment and feedback are useful in increasing student retention, the most useful form of assessment scrutinizes the actual student performance in the classroom. The professors are the first to be in contact with a student and can reveal if a student is struggling academically. The classroom feedback cycle is crucial to retention if a system is in place where faculty can notify personnel in the support services office, who in turn can assist the student. Students who are supported in completing their classes are more likely to complete college (Tinto, 2012).

The feedback and assessment success condition category had a total of 157 comments coded using NVivo; the classroom feedback subcategory had the most comments with 62 coded responses. Participants in this study reported inconsistent experiences with the feedback they received regarding their course work with feedback usually being very limited and often untimely. Feedback served as the primary interaction they had with faculty since they did not see them in the classroom itself. The classroom instruction was never live instruction so feedback was the only opportunity to gain insight into their progress. The absence of feedback from faculty was reported by the subjects to result in frustration and confusion in what they needed to do to be successful. Christopher mentioned,

> There've been a couple [times] where I felt that I've had to really ask, you know, "Is this right? Is this what you're looking for?" which is a little annoying. I kind of feel like when you submit something you should get feedback for it.

Twelve of the 15 students (80%) reported inconsistent experiences they also described as frustrating, with feedback often changing from professor to professor and class to class. Aisha described the varying experiences she had with three different professors in different classes, and how they gave classroom feedback in completely different ways in the online setting. Student

frustration was with the need to self-adjust from class to class overall, and most students found it confusing that they could be graded in different ways and reported having trouble adjusting to different classes at the beginning of each term. Students were consistent in explaining their desire for feedback and expressed gratitude for the feedback they did receive. It was clear in the interviews that students depended on course level feedback to help guide their studies and ensure positive progress in each course. Michael reported feeling frustrated by "the ambiguity," as he expressed receiving just a few words of feedback on an assignment and was unsure about final grading stating, "how do you get an A? It's so different from class to class."

Additionally, 3 of the 15 students (20%) described feedback as minimal on papers submitted online as well as the weekly forum assignments. Alexis reported minimal feedback with only a few words or one encouraging line. She was unhappy with the minimal amount of feedback because "you couldn't see the actual paper and each mark page by page on how they felt about it just so you could do better the next time." Students reported how this type of feedback differed from the more traditional methods of turning in a hard copy of her paper and receiving the paper back with constructive comments throughout. The negligible feedback was not enough to help students determine what, if any, adjustments should be made.

In addition to minimal and inconsistent feedback, students reported feedback was not timely. Five students out of the 15 (33%) specifically reported not getting feedback until the end of the semester and not being sure of how they were doing until the end of the semester. During his interview, Scotty noted that he was waiting for feedback on assignments from several weeks ago. Alexis, Chris, Christopher and Nicole all described taking classes in which they didn't know how they were doing until they received their final grade. They all wished they had had more feedback during the semester. Nicole said, "I wasn't very comfortable with that because I

felt like if there was something that I should have improved during the class, it's too late at the end." Overall, five participants (30%) unambiguously stated they wanted more feedback from their professors throughout the semester. The inconsistent feedback experience was a source of frustration for students who wanted to be successful and expected more guidance in this area.

The course syllabi supported this finding. Syllabi examination revealed an absence of clear feedback guidelines. While all four of the syllabi had a clear layout of assignments, none mentioned specifically how or when students would receive feedback on those assignments. The lack of specific feedback guidelines in the syllabi may contribute to student uncertainty over how and when they will be graded.

For the subjects who reported receiving feedback in the courses they enrolled in, the timing of feedback was important to them. Two of the 15 students reported how the feedback impacted their educational experience, thus supporting Tinto's success conditions theory of how feedback provides an important function in learning and student success. Tinto (2012) stresses the importance of early and frequent feedback that allows students to adjust to the standard that the professors expect. Tinto believes that constructive and timely feedback can increase student motivation in the classroom, which has been shown to improve student retention. Christopher noted that due to the nature of online weekly assignments, he thought feedback could have been more constant than in-person classes and saw this as a potential advantage of online classes. Lynn described her experience as positive, saying she thought her professors were good about giving feedback regularly and attributing their consistency to the nature of online weekly forums in the asynchronous environment.

The importance of feedback for subjects in this study is linked to their desire and expectation to be successful. Feedback was reported to be an essential component for them in

this environment since it was the only form of communication about their progress. Students expressed concerns about being able to keep up academically at a prestigious institution especially in an asynchronous environment. For these nontraditional students, the challenges of an online asynchronous environment and a lack of consistent classroom feedback was a part of most students' experience. Sharice spoke of her feedback experience and a concern in the timing of asynchronous classes:

> So, that's where I had issues because if I turned something in and the professor gives us feedback and if it was really something that was constructive and maybe I didn't understand it, it's a lag in time. So, I guess just not to have an actual person to talk to right away is a little frustrating. And then eventually when I got to talk to them, I understood it a little bit better or they understood what I was trying to convey.

Overall, the researcher found the feedback from the faculty to the students regarding their work in courses was inconsistent, with students reporting the need for more timely and frequent feedback. Consistent with what is reported in the research, students expressed their frustration, confusion and anxiety over a lack of feedback. Students identified the relationship between feedback and academic success explaining how additional feedback could help them to make academic adjustments to ensure success.

Engagement. Tinto (2012) suggests that student success is impacted by both academic and social engagement. Academic engagement has been known to improve student success and learning. The more engaged students are in their academics the more they learn, resulting in success. Subjects were asked about academic engagement with faculty and academic studies pertaining to their courses and overall academic program. Subjects were also asked about their

experiences with social engagement, and the opportunity to interact with peers both in the virtual classroom and out.

Academic engagement. Academic engagement occurs when students connect with professors and peers in the course of learning or completing academic work. Six students (40%) specifically mentioned difficulty in feeling academically engaged with their professors in the asynchronous class format. Many students found the asynchronous environment challenging when trying to develop relationships with faculty or interacting with their professor, especially when compared to a traditional classroom. One of the subjects, Alice, also expected the instructor to be more available online or by telephone when she needed assistance.

Upon review of the syllabi, it was found that the professors' email and phone numbers had been included in three of the four. Two of the syllabi clearly stated professors would respond within 48 hours; one syllabus indicated a 24-hour response time. Even though this was stated in the syllabi, students didn't appear to use this as a mechanism to interact with faculty. In addition, subjects reported excessive lag time in communicating with their faculty in the asynchronous environment.

Alexis and Alice both mentioned not having any physical or face-to-face interaction with the professor. Alexis found this to be the hardest part of online courses,

> because you do not have the physical interaction that you have with an onsite class professor. You don't have a class that you're like, 'Okay, I to make sure that my assignment is due because I'm going to have to go face this professor in this class and I don't want to be embarrassed because I don't have my assignment.'

Alice described the limitation "of engagement with online courses. You can only take it so far and that's it. It's not the same biological experience as being in the classroom at all."

Christopher described, “Aside from the speaking with the advisor for enrollment each semester I don’t really have much engagement with the faculty outside of the classroom.” Michael and Scotty also lamented little involvement with their professors. Terry summed up his experience,

> There’s something about that real life human face-to-face interaction that you have with the professor and the other students, the professors asking really thoughtful questions that make you dig deeper and really stretch your brain—I just don’t know how you replicate that in an online asynchronous environment.

The inability to know their professors had an impact on the experiences of academic engagement for these students. They seemed more concerned with knowing their professor, the person who has a greater impact on their academic success, than their peers.

When describing other experiences of academic engagement, 14 out of 15 participants (93.33%) described a positive experience with interesting and professionally pertinent coursework. Alexis spoke of finding her coursework interesting because it had practical application in her job. Hannan found “The classes I’ve taken online have been relevant and topical and with a good body of knowledge of written content that’s available either online or posted by the professor or included in our text material.” Nicole and Terry were particularly engaged with classes and trying to take ones they thought would be interesting and professionally appropriate. Research (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1998) would suggest that their academic involvement is a contributing factor to why these students continue to persist to degree completion.

Students identified the benefit and need for academic support and feedback but not necessarily a need for academic engagement with faculty and peers. The very nature of the asynchronous environment seemed to contribute to student feelings of being isolated or

disconnected from their peers and professors. Since students and faculty were never logged in at the same time, some students felt as if they didn't get a chance to get to know their classmates. Subjects reported to be unwilling to engage in these types of activities due to the time commitment involved in traditional opportunities to meet and work with faculty and peers face to face. Students viewed academic engagement as being focused on and successful in their courses. The focus on student expectations for success and their motivation for future career enhancement will be reviewed in the next theme. See Figure 9.

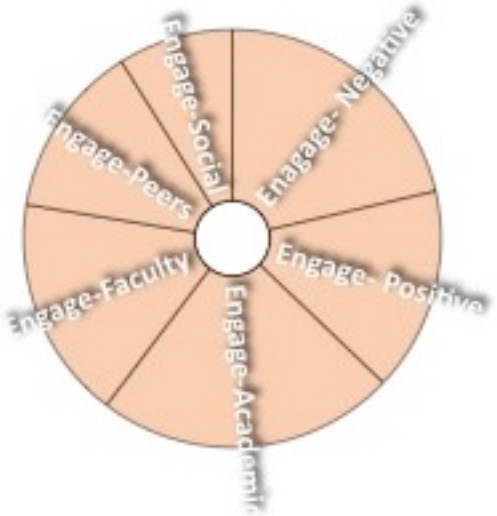

Figure 9. Engagement coding visual from NVivo.

Social engagement. Social engagement has been identified in the research as also being important to student success. The social engagement category yielded the greatest number of coded comments; the NVivo coding resulted in 393 coded comments specific to engagement out of the 1049 total comments coded. Out of the total engagement coded responses of 393, the largest numbers of responses coded were about faculty engagement (68) and academic engagement (91). The fewest were about social engagement (35) and peer engagement (53).

Overall, the NVivo coding also yielded 84 negative coded comments about engagement and 62 positive coded responses.

As reported by the subjects, the asynchronous environment proved challenging for developing social engagement with their peers and participating in social activities to provide opportunities to develop social relationships. Best practices in engagement and involvement would include being academically and socially integrated into their experiences.

The subjects interviewed in this study described an environment lacking in opportunities for social development and the development of peer-to-peer relationships. In fact, participants described an isolating experience. Beyond reading and responding to other students' postings, students reported little to no live student interaction. Social interaction in a typical academic environment could include study groups, working with students on projects, or discussing academic topics. Students reported difficulties when attempting to create opportunities for social engagement. Seventy-three percent (73.33%) of students reported this as a challenge in the asynchronous online program. When students were interviewed and questioned about their options regarding social interactions, they reported being less concerned about their ability to be socially engaged with peers and did not identify the relationship between social engagement and success. Students would respond by referring to how academic success was their primary objective, not socializing with peers.

When asked about participating in university activities such as clubs and organizations, the nontraditional age participant did not identify a need or desire for social integration into the university. Christopher explained, "In terms of social, I honestly don't do any of the University social—like any of those parts." Two participants (13.33%) with children suggested their spouse and family were their social support. Alexis mentioned the support of her husband in choosing

which degree to pursue at the school. Alice also mentioned her spouse being her support and reason for not participating in on campus activities, although she knew there were social opportunities available.

Michelle served in a school club leadership position, which required in-person meetings on campus. She was the only participant in the study (1/15 or 6.67%) to belong to an on-campus club. Nicole didn't think club activities were convenient for online students because they all meet on campus. Christopher also shared reluctance to join clubs saying, "I kind of feel like it's for the kids." Chris mentioned his attempt to be more social and wanting to join a club, but not really knowing how as an online student. Alexis expressed her focus was not on social pursuits, but completing her degree.

When asked about social engagement at the program and course level, the majority of students, 11 out of 15 participants (73.33%), found establishing relationships online to be difficult. Aisha summed up her experience succinctly, "Because technically you don't know anybody, you're doing everything online." Alexis explained, "I don't have much of a relationship with my peers because … the majority of my classes are online and I have yet to become friends with someone that I met in an online class." Alice and Chris also found socialization limiting in the online environment setting. Hannan and Sharice mentioned the delay in the asynchronous environment as "frustrating" and "crippling" to developing relationships. Scotty said there is "zero engagement with other students." Lynn described her experience as depersonalized. Terry described his perspective as a busy, adult student saying he was there for the academics and not to make new friends.

Overall, social engagement through traditional methods and campus activities was not always possible for this group of students, due to convenience, geographic proximity, lack of

information, or a primary focus on academics. Research on traditional students supports a need for academic and social engagement for students to develop institutional affiliation or a sense of belonging. The research site provided online students with the same services as they did the face-to-face students with the subjects reporting that these opportunities were not realistic options for them to take advantage of. As such, participants reported having a different experience than their on-campus peers, and many students felt they were having a lesser experience because of their lack of engagement.

Support. When asked follow up probing questions about meaningful support experiences, Alexis was the only student (1/15 or 6.67%) who mentioned her orientation experience:

> Not a mandatory orientation, but it was one that I did attend and it was for all new students who were enrolling—it was just an orientation where you got to know everyone else in the program, where they had someone from like each department speak with everyone, someone from financial aid, someone from the Wasserman Center … all of the advisors there who were going to be, you know, everyone's advisor during your time there. So, they did have that in the start of the semester. … So, I don't believe it was mandatory, but it was highly recommended and I did attend.

When other students were asked about their orientation experiences, 6 of the 15 (40%) could not remember if they were offered an orientation and eight of the 15 (53.55%) were confident that no orientation was offered to them. There was no information available online to confirm if an orientation program was offered or not. Tinto (2012) and other researchers suggest that orientation programs are an opportunity for an institution to establish expectations for success in the program, while also allowing an opportunity for social engagement. If Tinto were correct,

then a lack of an orientation program would be detrimental to students for establishing accurate academic expectations and developing meaningful peer relationships. A study by O'Gara et al. (2009) found that orientation is an appropriate format for reviewing and enhancing study skills and often used to set the student up for academic success. If their study findings apply to the current participants, then the participants would also then be lacking this academic basis for success.

It is also important to note that the orientation experience described by Alexis took place on campus. Although additional support services are also located on campus and not specifically provided in another format to online students, there is information on the school website about the Academic Support Services office. Christopher had also mentioned some specific academic support he used in his experience, such as the library and computer lab on campus. However, an overall lack of remote access to support services resulted in students reporting a negative impact on their student experience, including their feeling of being separate from, and possibly having a lesser experience than, on campus students. Almost half of the participants (7/15 or 46.67%) found a lack of academic support online. Lynn described the perceived disconnect and isolation:

> So it—there's a real detachment. You feel like there's sort of a wall between you and the traditional students. I felt that way. I didn't feel like I wasn't welcome there. I didn't feel like they didn't want to include me, but I felt like you're here, I'm here, we're never on the same wavelength.

Sanchez also went on to describe how she viewed the online student experience as different from the on-campus students, and compared it to her previous online experience:

> That is something that my last school did, was they always interacted. If they gave all the regular students something, they would give that to you, too. So, through SUNY I

> received I beach towel right before summer vacation, a hard drive right before exams, and a T-shirt saying, "Hey, welcome, you've been accepted," blah, blah, blah. But this University doesn't do that.

Expressing some isolation similar to Lynn's experience, Alice reported her experience to be mixed:

> Personally, I never found it very academically supportive, although I recognize that the resources are enormous—enormous. It's extraordinary. But in a funny way I'm an odd demographic in that I'm always an outsider, so I'm not necessarily someone that anyone is going to gravitate towards, unless it was on a one to one. So academically supportive, I don't know.

Two more students also suggested that their specific demographic, being an adult online student, had something to do with the lack of support they received. Sanchez and Sharice both expressed a deficiency in online support services and a shortage of resources for nontraditional students. Sanchez lamented:

> I don't think they offer enough online support at all. If you're there on site, you can go to the writing workshops, you can have someone review your work, you have TAs, and you have a lot more resources. And you don't have that online at all.

Some research (Bauman et al., 2004) suggests that nontraditional students would benefit from their own support services with staff prepared to handle the needs of this growing population.

Alexis, Alice and Hannah all expected the program to be geared towards nontraditional students, with more flexibility in scheduling and available resources. Sanchez also shared understanding of the online environment, but had an expectation that online students should receive the same support services and opportunities as on-ground students. She explained that

she viewed the programs as very separate. “They have a welcome week for freshman, or for newcomers to the university, but there are also online students who are new, and they don’t send a T-shirt.” Sanchez explained how she is not in geographic proximity to the university, but still wants to feel a part of the university and receive the same benefits and services, as she believes traditional on-campus students do. Nicole was aware that social opportunities were available, but didn’t participate since “most of it is on campus.” Sharice found frustration in her experience

> because if there is any support, it’s like during the day, at a workshop, where most people have to work. So, it’s not really available. So, they didn’t have good hours in terms of like the Writing Center and all of that. They just didn’t have good hours for people that are nontraditional students.

Figure 10. Support coding visual from NVivo.

In summary, Tinto’s student success factors (assessment, feedback, academic and social engagement) were not consistently present in this educational setting as reported by the sample of participants in this study (see Figure 10). Assessments upon entry were almost completely

lacking, with only two of 15 participants reporting this as part of their experience. The participant experiences with classroom feedback were inconsistent, with great variation from professor to professor; 80% shared frustrating experiences due to the lack of consistent and timely feedback. A few students related that they did not know how they were doing until the very end of the semester, which seemed to make them anxious about their overall success in the class. Participants found the online asynchronous environment not conducive to developing relationships with faculty or peers. Many of the success conditions determined from research on traditional, residential students were not consistently present with the nontraditional students interviewed, but students were able to identify the need for these opportunities and experiences.

Theme 2. Nontraditional students identified key elements for success. These included flexibility in their schedule and the opportunity to receive a degree from a reputable institution that would lead to career enhancement.

In Chapter 2, we reviewed some of the research surrounding the success condition of expectations. Tinto (2102) proposes the student success condition of expectations includes the expectations that students have about themselves, the expectations that the professors establish for student performance, and the institutional expectation (or reputation). Braxton, Vessler, and Hosper (1995) support the importance of fulfilling those expectations, as they found it increased "academic integration and social integration experienced by the student" (p. 604–605), which then led to increased retention and degree completion.

Subjects in the current study were nontraditional age students enrolling in an online degree program. Several of the participants had been in a bachelor's degree program before and believed through their life experiences that they had learned from their past mistakes and could

be successful this time. Subjects reported how past experiences refocused their current academic goals and expectations and renewed their motivation to complete the degree this time.

For the participants in this study, their expectation of success was closely related to their current motivating factor of career enhancement and desire for further education important for future employment opportunities. Participants also reported the reputation of the university they attended as an important factor to them at this time. Many believed that the reputation of the university would assist in career prospects. Subjects reported valuing the opportunity to complete their degree from a highly reputable institution as an important factor.

Expectation. From coding the interviews with these nontraditional students, many expressed similar interests and motivations for seeking the bachelor's degree online. 6 out of 15 expressed that it would help them in career aspirations. Ten out of 15 expected to complete the bachelors' degree, as they had not been successful in their first attempt at bachelors' degree completion or wanted to go beyond an earned associates degree. The NVivo coding also supports this focus on personal expectations with 45 of the 178 responses coded.

Since a majority (66.67%) expressed degree completion as a goal, subjects seemed to already have the mindset and expectation for personal success in the program. Terry shared his beliefs:

> So, I went in with the attitude that if I'm going to be spending so much of this money out of my pocket I'm going to take full advantage of everything that's available. I'm not going to waste any time, I'm not going to waste any energy, I'm not going to blow off classes or do anything that I did that made me unsuccessful the first time. So, I just came to it and almost treated it like a graduate program, considering my age and where I was in life.

His renewed motivation and expectation to succeed was clear.

Seven of the 15 (46.67%) participants expressed belief in their own abilities, even going so far as to say they expected the online program might be easier academically and on their schedule. Aisha clearly expressed that sentiment:

> I actually thought it would be easy. I thought this was going to be the most convenient way of getting my degree, that I would have to put in the minimal work possible, it should be fine. Because I mean that's what everybody thinks an online degree's about, that you really don't put in a lot of work.

Although some participants expected they would perform better, it was mainly due to beliefs that online education might be easier, meaning less work and more convenient scheduling, than the traditional classroom.

However, a few students who had previously attempted a college degree had expectations that online education would be an academic challenge. For example, Terry and Hannah both had high expectations for academic success, but did not expect the educational aspects of the degree to be easy and knew they would have to put in a lot of work. Sharice expounded on her experience:

> I think it is consistent. I think that for me, for my experience, the faculty… wanted us to do our best, so they pushed us in order to get that done. They expected it to be quality work and that's what this University expects. Yes, I think that they were clear of overall expectations.

Alexis and Ruben clarified their experiences as tough, but fair and said they felt challenged. They both remained confident that they could still be successful in the classroom. Overall, personal expectations were positive with students expecting to be academically successful and

complete their degree, despite a few concerns over a lack of experience and knowledge about asynchronous online education. See Figure 11.

Figure 11. Expectations coding visual from NVivo.

In addition to their academic expectations, participants were also asked to describe what they knew about the university and their perception of the program and its reputation. Research (Kuh, Cruce, et al., 2008; Tinto, 2012) suggests that the level of effort expected by the institution can influence the student level of effort and success in college. NVivo coding yielded 38 specific coded responses on institutional expectations. Eight students of the 15 (53%) discussed the prestige of attending the university and the university's reputation as a world-class institution. Scotty spoke about how the reputation of the university may have helped him secure employment even before he finished his degree, by having the university listed on his résumé.

Most students were very proud that they attended an institution that is well known for being a rigorous and prestigious university. Christopher reported, "But what prompts me to stay is I really want the University on my résumé. It's a good program for what I'm looking for. So, I guess their name is what's keeping me, the name and quality of the classes." Due to this

reputation of excellence, students expected to be challenged academically by the professors and the institution, but still believed in their own abilities to be successful.

The prestige of the institution, and how its reputation could assist in career opportunities was a motivating factor for retention in the program. Christopher said, "I think it's important to have that physical presence reputationally [sic]. And I think that the fact that they can deliver online is value added." Alexis also mentioned the reputation of the school saying, "it was this university and they do, you know, stand behind their name." Lynn mentioned not being familiar with the reputation originally, "So when I finally understood the gravity of how good of a school I did get into I was pretty humbled by it." Scotty mentioned the response of others when he tells them where he's getting his degree, "I say 'the University,' they're like, 'Whoa, you go there?' It's this big prestigious college." Most students considered attending a prestigious school to be a very positive part of their experience.

Anctil (2008) declares that the positive image of a college or university, "Not only does it influence whether or not prospective students will enroll but also whether or not those who have enrolled stay or leave." Delgado-Márquez, Escudero-Torres, and Hurtado-Torres (2013) also found that the institutional reputation could have a positive influence on "loyalty" to the institution, which in turn "may affect the decision to drop out" (p. 623). Subjects in this study support these findings, as they remained enrolled and wanted to earn their degree due to institutional reputation. Research shows that by increasing institutional affiliation and integration, it is possible to reduce attrition and increase student persistence (Rendón, 1994; Tinto, 1988).

Also, indirect career opportunities such as networking played a role for one student. Ruben expressed expectations about networking opportunities, as he thought pursing this degree

would lead him to a better job. He specifically mentioned a club at the school that a business was known to regularly hire from due to the institutional reputation for excellence. In support of this finding, see the general information brochure about the schools and its programs, professional networking is mentioned as one of the benefits of the program for working adult students. This same online literature also refers to the benefit students will receive from having access to the unparalleled support and resources of such a large and prestigious research university. The reputation of the university and esteemed status seems to be a contributing factor in why students want to be successful and earn their degree from this university.

Findings from this study showed that students did not experience consistent and rich forms of feedback, support and social relationships with peers in the asynchronous online environment. Interestingly, students reported a lack of opportunities to engage with their classmates and feelings of isolation, but when asked if they would be interested in participating in more social events, students cited their time constraints with work and family demands as limiting their ability to do so. Students expected the program to allow for flexibility, and allow them to continue to work and raise families while completing their degree requirements. Students reported how their current schedule and responsibilities would not allow them to participate in social engagement opportunities provided to the on-campus, face-to-face students. Nine out of 15 (60%) said they, as busy nontraditional students, couldn't give up the convenience they need in the asynchronous classes just to know their peers better. They didn't hesitate when asked about possibly wanting synchronous classes—the answer was clearly no. Only one student thought about the options (synchronous or asynchronous) and suggested maybe a blended or hybrid environment, where it wouldn't be a regular, consistent scheduling issue but

only once or twice a semester where in-person meetings could take place and she could meet her peers in person. Other students recognized this would not be physically possible for those in the program who live out of state. The NVivo coding yielded 16 coded comments specific to the expectation and convenience of the asynchronous environment. For these adult students, with so many other responsibilities outside of school, the flexibility to be able to do their coursework at a time when they can fit it into their busy lives is an expectation of this program that is being met in their experiences.

Subjects reported that at this point in their educational career, they would forgo academic support and faculty and peer interactions typically received in a more traditional educational setting for what they described as their own essential conditions. Currently, to succeed, they needed more flexibility and the ability to individualize their classroom schedule which allowed the participants to focus on their academics while also continuing in their career and/or fulfilling family commitments and responsibilities (such as raising their children). Students did report wanting to have more interaction and feedback from their faculty as one of the few success conditions they missed. Subjects reported that Tinto's success conditions would most likely be a benefit to them, but at this time now those success conditions were not a priority.

Overall, students were generally optimistic about their ability to be successful and were motivated by future career possibilities. Thirteen out of the 15 clearly expressed their motivation for returning to school was to complete the degree or help with career aspirations. Their emphasis on why they needed the degree had them entering the program with positive personal expectations. Seven students even expected it to be easy, due to the perceived ease and convenience of online education. They expected the flexibility they needed would be available to them in the online format. However, some of those same students also seemed to have a more

realistic expectation that the coursework would be challenging, both academically, considering the prestige of the institution, as well as the time commitment in their already busy lives.

Students did express the university reputation, as an academically prestigious institution, was a positive part of their experience mostly because of the perception that it would enhance future career opportunities. Eight of the 15 students specifically mentioned the pride of having been admitted to the university, or how others reacted in awe when they found out where they were getting their bachelor's degree. The reputation of the institution as a respected research institution seemed to contribute to the students' high academic expectations. As Tinto (2012) has stated, when students are given high expectations, they will often rise to the challenge to meet those expectations. See Figure 12.

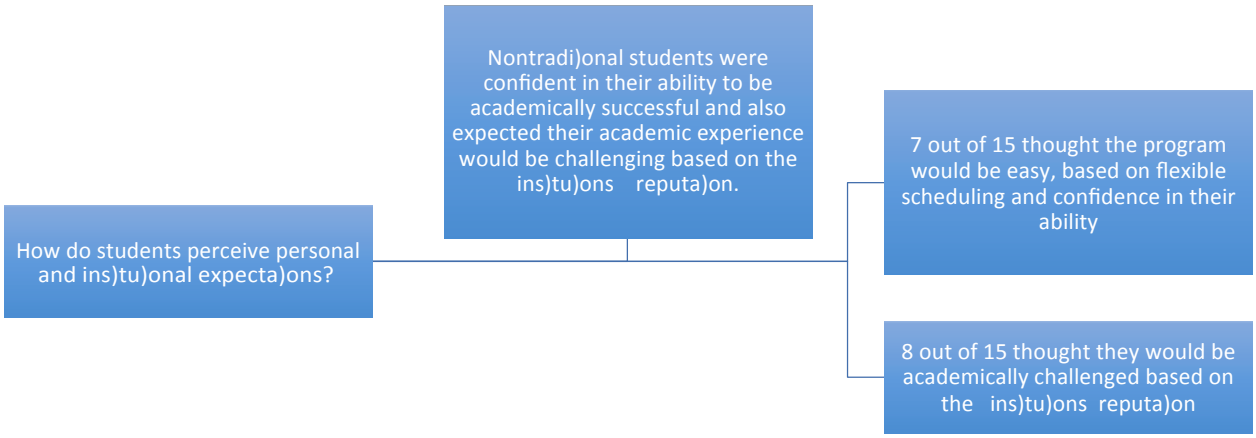

Figure 12. Summary of success condition expectations and supporting findings.

Theme 3. Students reported to have developed a strong, productive and positive academic relationship with their advisor. The advisor served as a substitute for the traditional faculty-student relationships and was the primary role for providing academic, social and financial support.

In this study, students were asked about the student success condition that encompassed support. In-depth interviews revealed that the students' academic advisor served as the key person providing support and guidance for the students. The advisor had appeared to be the primary contact for the student and through this role had developed the type of academic relationship often seen in a traditional setting with faculty and faculty advisors. Subjects were asked to talk about faculty, staff, or peers who provided academic or emotional support to help participants achieve success in their degree program. Participants were told, "For the purpose of this study, we define support as: The academic, social and financial assistance that a student may receive either from themselves, their family, or from their academic institution." The NVivo coding resulted in 272 total coded comments regarding support, with 88 of those comments specific to academic support. The data yielded that the advisor provided the majority of services or assisted the students in finding the services needed and was clearly the most beneficial support person in the program for the participants.

The academic advisor played an important, unique, and multifaceted role in the experience of these nontraditional online students at the research site. Thirteen of the 15 (86.67%) students interviewed had extremely positive experiences with their advisor. From the beginning, the advisor was helpful in guiding students through the unfamiliar territory of being newly admitted to the university. Aisha reflected on her experience of receiving her admittance letter to the program and not knowing what to do. She wondered, "'So how do I start?' and then reported that the next day, she received an email from a woman stating, 'Hello. I am your academic advisor and I shall help guide you through this difficult journey and make it very nice and easy for you.' We set up a Skype session and she explained everything to me." She appreciated that her advisor proactively reached out and began the next steps with her. This first

contact to guide newly admitted students through the next steps is only one of the many roles the advisor fulfills.

Another role the advisor fulfilled was guiding students through their academic planning, a more traditional academic role. A review of the website revealed that all students in the program were required to meet with their advisor to be cleared to register for classes in the following semester. So, each student had to meet with the advisor at least once per semester to get registration clearance. Most students reported these meetings as taking place in person. Chris, Lynn, Ruben, Sharice, and Scotty shared very positive experiences with their advisors during these academic advising meetings, getting good advice from their advisor about which classes to take, how many classes to take each semester, which classes to avoid taking together (to avoid work overload), and guidance on professors. Sanchez spoke of her experience as being helpful when meeting with her advisor, also stating how quick and responsive she was to her inquiries. Several students also seemed to have developed a professional friendship with their advisors, truly believing that they had their best interests in mind. Even Michael, who shared his many frustrations with the program openly, had very positive things to say about his advisor, expressing that she understood his frustrations and was a good listener.

Alexis shared, "she's also given, you know, valuable advice, like, 'Okay, I don't think you should take accounting and finance in the same semester.' And I listened." Chris said,

> My advisor, she's really good. She's actually the woman who formally evaluated my credits from my previous school and sort of got me down this track of organizational behavior. She's been very helpful. She—I think it's great that she has a background in psychology. I think that also makes her a very good listener, and she does that very well.

Hannan imparted, “If I want to hit this timeline—and that’s another reason for the advisors, to check my expectations, make sure that what I assume I can do is actually feasible.”

Lynn described her experiences with feeling supported, “Advisors, professors. This University is really definitely there to begin with, even more so when you’re taking classes online. This school has been here for me in ways that my other college never was.”

Sanchez compared her current advisor to one at her first attempt at her bachelor’s degree at another institution.

> So, she’s very open, and she’s very helpful, and she’s also quite quick. With my last one, she would take a week sometimes to get back to you, and you’d have to follow up with calls and so on and so forth. But my current one here is very responsible.

Scotty described his regular semester meeting:

> You know, we just kind of talk about what’s going on. She’s good. You know, I ask her about these teachers, like what have you heard, are they good, are they bad, you know, make sure I’m taking all my prerequisites; I’m taking a good mix of classes. You know, and then we just laugh, we joke a little bit and then that’s it.

The general brochure about the program supports this finding. A “highly supportive environment” is advertised in these marketing materials about the online program and the university delivers on this finding through the academic advisor role.

Overall, students felt supported by their advisors. Almost every student (13/15) participant had an overwhelmingly positive experience with their advisor. NVivo coding yielded almost double the number of positive coded responses on support (65) than negative (34) ones. Rendón (1998) found one person, whether faculty, administrator, or staff, could make a difference by providing support and encouragement. Her research suggests that this one person

could be a motivating factor to keep a student enrolled at the institution. The advisor(s) for the nontraditional students interviewed in this study had a positive impact on the students in more ways than traditionally associated with the academic advisor role.

The subjects in this study also found their academic advisor assisted in financial aid matters. Financial aid support is usually managed by an institution financial aid office, with financial aid counselors to assist students. The financial aid counselors at the research site were specifically trained on the rules and regulations regarding federal and state aid and loans. Research (McKinney and Novak, 2013) shows that financial aid can increase degree persistence. From a review of the website, the primary researcher found that while the university has a financial aid office, each individual school within the university does not. At this research site, students often have to rely on a centralized office located across campus if they have financial aid questions. At this site and for this particular population, visiting this office is not always convenient as it operates during regular business hours or geographically possible for the online students not located in the state.

When asked about financial support, Christopher, Terry, and Scotty recalled either receiving emails from their advisor about and/or attending a financial aid workshop. They received the emails or information about the workshop from their advisor, now filling a financial support role not usually associated with the academic advisor role. Nicole and Ruben also went to their advisor for financial help, who yet again provided assistance in completing scholarship applications. Lynn and Alexis felt that there was abundant communication about scholarship opportunities and other financial assistance, mostly coming from the advisor. Hannan was able to get financial support and reflected that being awarded some funding showed the school "had some faith in me and that I fit a demographic that was deserving of an opportunity and so I much

appreciated it and recognized the value." Those who did receive financial assistance seemed to feel more a part of the community from receiving that help. Students also appreciated that their advisor expressed personal interest in them and assisted in these school-related financial matters. Possibly from previous educational experiences, students seemed to be aware that this was above and beyond the traditional advisor role.

Rendón (1994) suggests that nontraditional students can feel "alienated and intimidated" by trying to fit into a college community. She goes on to suggest that "validation may be the missing link to involvement" (p. 37), and additional research has already shown that students who are involved are more likely to persist (Astin, 1984). Since the advisor fulfilled so many roles and helped students in so many capacities, it seems possible that he or she may be the link to the university and can provide the support and validation they need. Subjects explained that their career goals and successful degree obtainment depended on a flexible academic schedule precluding them from participating in traditional opportunities for engagement. Students in this study reported finding social and academic engagement with their academic advisor. The advisor overwhelmingly provided the most consistent support in these students' experiences.

Overall, students felt most supported by their advisors, who helped them in many ways outside of the traditional advisor role. Almost every student (13/15) participant had an overwhelmingly positive experience with their advisor. Some felt they could have received more financial support, as many students attending a private institution often do. Other students felt validated and appreciative of the financial support they did receive. While the orientation area of support was almost completely lacking, the tremendous positive support from the advisor in areas outside a typical academic advisor purview made a huge impact on these students'

experience. Michelle may have best summarized her experience with all support areas (academic, personal, financial) saying:

> I think the greatest thing about going to school is like even if you're on your own you always meet people that are always willing to help. At least that's been my experience. So … I think I would say a lot of people helped out along the way. I can't tell you where or how. I think financial aid always helped out and students always help out and the faculty always helps out. I think everyone gives a little something.

Summary

Several key themes emerged from the data about the nontraditional students' experience in one online bachelor's degree program (see Figure 13). Overall, students found most of Tinto's success conditions, considered being a best practice with traditional, residential students, to be missing in their experience.

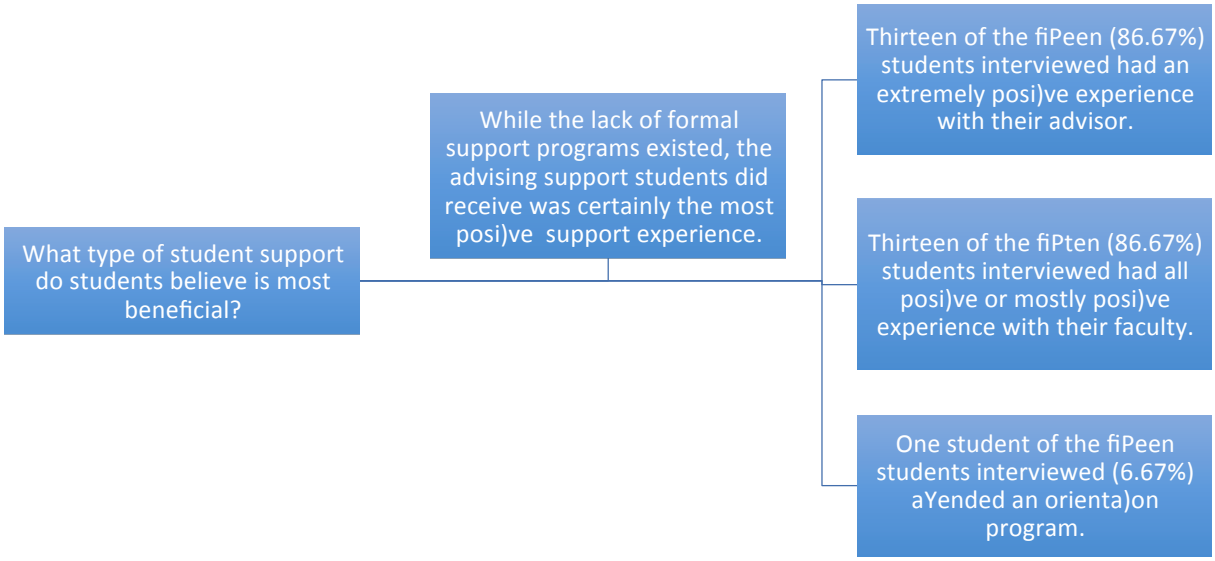

Figure 13. Summary of success condition support and supporting findings.

The lack of or inconsistency in the delivery of the success conditions caused the students' confusion, anxiety, and frustration. However, students remained positive about their overall educational experience due to the ability to have flexibility in their schedules. The nontraditional students in this study needed to be able to fit their courses in around their careers and family responsibilities. The students also experienced an academic advisor that served many functions, unlike a traditional advisor role. The academic advisor in this program was a main source of support and may have kept students academically and socially engaged in the program. The subjects interviewed were also positive about their future career opportunities and believed they would be enhanced from graduating from a prestigious institution. While the students' experience lacked consistent delivery of Tinto's success conditions, the subjects still found positive aspects in their experiences through their academic advisor, flexible scheduling, and focus on future degree attainment and career enhancement.

Findings for Research Question 2

RQ2 asked: What are the perceptions of student success from students of different sociodemographic, age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds? The purpose of this question is to determine if students of different genders, from different age groups, or with other varying sociodemographic data had different perceptions, experiences and interactions with the success conditions.

Gender. Some gender differences were noted in different success conditions. In the feedback and assessment success condition, males and females made a similar number of responses regarding most assessment and feedback subcategories and a similar number of positive responses, but females made 15 negative remarks about assessment as compared to 9 for the males. For expectations, a similar number of responses were given for faculty expectations

and overall positive experiences, but the women spoke much more about institutional expectations (22 as compared to 14 for males), personal expectations (29 as compared to 15 for males), and overall negative expectation experiences (21 as compared to 12 for males). In the support condition, women had 23 comments about social support as compared to the males with 12. Women also had more positive comments in the support category, with 39 compared to the males with 26. Regarding engagement, women had many more comments (36) as compared to males (16) when asked about engagement with peers and more positive comments (35) than males (27) overall.

Ethnicity. In comparing ethnic data, the coding results yielded Caucasian participants making twice as many comments as African Americans in the areas of classroom (41 to 19) and entry (12 to 6). Both groups had more positive feedback comments than negative. Ethnic differences are seen in the number of engagement responses with Caucasians reporting a much greater number of negative experiences (53 as compared to 19 for African Americans) and twice as many positive experiences (36 as compared to 18). It is interesting to note that African Americans had almost an equal number of positive and negative responses for the engagement success condition. Both groups commented most about academic and faculty engagement. The Hispanic- identified student commented on personal expectations and negative expectation experiences and commented the most about academic engagement and positive engagement experiences.

Both Caucasians and African Americans had the most responses about academic support (42 and 28) and both groups also reported more positive support experiences (38 and 22) than negative (19 and 9). African Americans had social support with the second highest number of

comments (15) where Caucasians had financial support with the second highest number of comments (25).

Age. The age group data shows participants in the age range of 31–35 made the most responses about classroom feedback (26), as all other groups had 11 comments (age group of 46–50 years old) or less. Participants in 31 to 35 age range also had the most positive comments (14) overall as all other groups were seven comments coded or less.

Age differences in the expectation success condition category were shown in the two youngest age groups (24–30 years old and 31–35 years old) having the most comments about personal expectations (13 and 15 respectively). The next oldest group, ages 36–40, had more results in the faculty and institutional expectations areas. The 31–35 age group was the only age group to have more negative (13) than positive (12) comments in the expectations success condition category.

In age group comparisons on the support success condition, almost every age group had the highest number of responses coded in academic support and positive support experiences except one group. Those participants 36–40 years old had only one less comment (13) about financial support than academic support (14), and over all had more negative experience (10) comments than positive (8).

A notable finding from the engagement category is in the 56–60-year-old category. This group had the highest number of coded responses in both engagement with faculty and engagement with peers. All other age groups scored the highest numbers of responses coded in engagement with academics theme.

Dependents. The participants with no dependent children had more coded responses in all three areas (entry, classroom, and institutional) of the feedback and assessment condition and

many more positive responses (28, as compared to 5 from the participants with children). Interestingly, the dependent children factor showed differences in the expectations success condition with those with at least one child having fewer comments in all categories and comparable numbers of negative experience (5) comments as positive ones (8). The participants with no children had analogous positive experiences (30) coded as negative ones (28).

The data in the success condition of engagement or involvement, those without children reported much higher numbers of remarks in all engagement subcategories, but especially academic (71) and faculty (56) engagement and more negative experience remarks (66). For those participants with one or more children, they had twice as many negative experiences coded (18) as positive (9).

Employment. For employment status, all the participants reported they were working full time (13 out of 15), except one person reported as self-employed and considered that part-time work and one person not working for pay but volunteering. In each success condition, the full-time workers had the most comments on academic engagement (70), academic support (59), classroom feedback (51), and personal expectations (33). These same categories had the most comments from the part-time, self-employed worker and the volunteer. All success condition categories had more positive comments than negative, except for engagement, which had 75 negative comments coded as compared to 52 positive ones for full-time workers, and 8 negative comments coded as compared to 7 for the part-time, self-employed worker. The participant volunteering had three positive engagement responses coded and only one negative response.

Marital status. Participants were asked about their marital status—whether they were single, married, or separated/divorced. Marital status seemed to have little impact on the number of coded responses, as the patterns of highest and lowest in each subcategory remained

consistent, except for one. In the feedback subcategories, single participants commented most on classroom feedback (25) and then institutional feedback (12), where married and separated/divorced participants commented most on classroom feedback (18 and 19) and then feedback upon entry (9 and 2).

When comparing coded positive and negative experiences, the single and separated or divorced status answered similarly, with more positive coded experiences in feedback and assessment (19 and 5), while the married participants had more negative feedback experiences coded (13). In expectations, single (17) and married (13) participants had more positive responses coded, but separated/divorced had more negative (11) responses coded. A similar pattern existed in the data on engagement with single (48) and married (22) had more negative responses coded, but separated/divorced had more positive (18) responses coded. In the support success condition, all participant groups had more positive support experiences than negative.

Summary of Demographic Data

The demographic data yielded some interesting results. Few noteworthy differences were found in the gender, ethnicity, and age categories. The most interesting results came from the participants with no dependent children, who had more coded responses in the feedback and assessment condition and many more positive responses in feedback and assessment. Those with one or more children reported twice as many negative experiences coded in engagement and involvement categories. The research data suggests those without children found more positive coded feedback experiences, and those with children had more negatively coded engagement experiences.

Another interesting result is found in comparing employment status to the success conditions categories. Employed participants had more positive comments than negative, except

in the area engagement. Those working had more negative experiences coded in engagement, which seems consistent with participants reporting little engagement with faculty and peers.

The last category explored differences in marital status. When comparing positive and negative experiences coded in expectations, single and married participants had more positive responses coded, but separated/divorced had more negative responses coded in expectations. A similar pattern existed in the data on engagement with single and married having more negative responses coded, but separated/divorced more positive engagement responses coded. Additional research may need to be done to determine how marital status has an impact on the nontraditional student experience. In the next section, Table 3 shows a summary of results.

Summary of Key Findings

Table 3

Research Questions and Results

Research question	Results
How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?	The data revealed that students did not receive consistent forms of feedback or pre-entry assessments. Students reported that regular feedback would have been beneficial and they found the lack of guidance frustrating.
How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?	Nontraditional students expected they would be academically successful (some learned from prior experiences) based on flexible scheduling and also expected their academic experience would be challenging based on the institutions reputation.
What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?	Students report their advisor as the most beneficial to their experience. A lack of formal online support programs may be the least beneficial part of their degree program.

(continued)

Research Question	Results
How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?	Students reported professionally interesting coursework, but felt extremely limited in the asynchronous environments' ability to provide opportunities for them to be engaged socially with their peers and faculty.

The time spent interviewing the 15 participants provided rich data about their experiences as nontraditional students in an online bachelor's degree program. Some key findings emerged from their perceptions of those experiences that encompassed each of the success condition categories: feedback and assessment, expectations, support, and engagement. Some interesting findings in the comparison of demographic data to each of the support conditions also emerged, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

From these key findings, overarching themes emerged about the nontraditional online student experience with the success conditions:

1. Nontraditional students identified in an asynchronous online environment did not find the success conditions to be consistently present and reported that they would have benefitted from them if they had existed both academically and socially.
2. Nontraditional students identified key elements for success. These included flexibility in their schedule and the opportunity to receive a degree from a reputable institution that would lead to career enhancement.
3. Students reported developing a strong, productive, and positive academic relationship with their advisor. The advisor served as a substitute for the traditional faculty-student relationships and was the primary role for providing academic, social, and financial support.

For assessment and feedback upon entry, the experiences were fairly consistent with only two students reporting only needing proficiency tests in English or math, and one taking a computer proficiency seminar. For classroom feedback and assessment, experiences varied with a few participants reporting instances of constructive feedback from faculty, but most others finding there to be too little feedback or only receiving it at the end of the semester. Institutional assessments, manifested as end of semester course evaluations, were one of the best practices that existed as a part of these students' experience and consistently reported as a positive part of the student experience. As described in the literature review in Chapter 2, research shows that adult students are active learners and seek to be a part of their education. Perhaps the overall positive response to the institutional end of semester assessments was due to this need for adults to be involved in their education or to be able to answer questions about this area when other best practices were lacking.

For expectations, participants reported on personal, faculty, and institutional expectations. Participants reported expectations fulfilled based on the availability of flexible scheduling. Other expectations centered around main themes of participants expecting to do well, often explicitly saying they expected to do better than their first time in college. Participants also realistically expected the workload to be substantial and would take considerable time commitment. This is consistent with participant reported expectations about the institution that the university is prestigious and rigorous.

However challenging the program was expected to be, students also reported support in academic, social, and financial areas. Many students spoke of their academic advisor filling many roles not often associated with the role. The advisor was often the person to email about scholarship opportunities and assist with applications, as well as academic and course

advisement. Negative experiences included a lack of orientation and other support programs online or at hours convenient to the nontraditional student. Students perceived that online resources were not as plentiful as they were for on-campus students. Some felt that they received a lesser experience then their on-campus peers due to the lack of support services for online, nontraditional students.

The research sought to discover if engagement experiences occurred in academic and social areas with faculty and peers. Most students reported interesting coursework that had professional relevance in their current career. Most also reported difficulty in engaging in the asynchronous environment, that engagement with peers and/or faculty was limited in both the depth of interactions and in the delays in interactions. A few students questioned whether it was possible, or necessary, to develop relationships through an online format. Overall, the online nontraditional student remained focused on completing his/her degree and future career opportunities that would come from securing the degree from a prestigious institution. Despite several success conditions lacking or being inconsistent in these students' experience, they remained positive and focused on the positive impact the degree would have on their future career opportunities.

Summary of Chapter 4

In this chapter, the researcher presented the findings of the study. These findings are based primarily on the individual interviews conducted with each participant and supplemented by online information from the university website, marketing materials found online, and four syllabi from online courses. The participant descriptions of their lived experience contributed greatly to the findings on each of the success conditions. The data on their shared, common experiences led to the key findings in each success condition. These key findings were then

further explored into overarching themes that encompass the nontraditional student experience for this group of students. Additional discussion of these overarching themes will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, as well as the implications these findings may have on current practice and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 5. Discussion

Chapter 1 of this study seeks to introduce the purpose of the study—to provide a rich, detailed description of the lived experience of the nontraditional online student to add to the emerging research on this understudied population. Additionally, the intention of this study is to understand and describe the conditions that influence student success (expectations, support, engagement, and feedback) specifically for nontraditional students in online classes. This chapter also introduces the following research questions that guide the study:

RQ1: How do nontraditional students perceive institutional conditions of student success while enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program?

- How do students experience assessment and feedback from faculty?
- How do students perceive personal and institutional expectations?
- What type of student support do students believe is most beneficial?
- How do students experience academic and social engagement and involvement?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of student success from students of different sociodemographic, age, gender, and ethnic backgrounds?

Contents of Chapter 1 also include background, statement of the problem, and statement of the purpose, research questions, key definitions, theoretical framework, limitations, researcher assumptions, and the organization of the study.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature including recent dissertations, research articles, scholarly books, peer reviewed journals and an abbreviated history of online education as background on the learning mode for this study. Next, literature findings on the definition of the nontraditional students and their needs were discussed. Lastly, the researcher reviewed the literature findings on the four conditions of student success: expectations, support, engagement

and feedback, the basis of the theoretical framework of the study. Previous research on each individual success condition was also explored briefly to provide a summary of the findings to date. However, with minimal research on these conditions with nontraditional online students, the body of research provided shows the timeliness and necessity for further research on the nontraditional online student.

Chapter 3 presented the methodology, research design, epistemology, sources of data, setting, sample, data collection strategy, instruments, human subjects consideration, data analysis, and facets of reliability and validity. This chapter describes the process for collecting the data needed to describe the lived experiences of the nontraditional online student, with the utmost care given to the consideration of human subjects.

Chapter 4 included the findings of the study. This study sought to understand the experience of these students in their own words, achieved by conducting interviews with each individual participant. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the nontraditional online student perceptions of success conditions. The interviews with participants provided rich data about their experiences as nontraditional students in online bachelor's degree programs. Additional data was obtained from online admissions information, the school website, and online course syllabi. From the data analysis and constant coding, themes began to emerge to answer each of the questions about the success conditions.

Through the rich descriptions of their experiences, several key findings emerged that included each of the success condition categories: feedback and assessment, expectations, support, and engagement. The findings of the study yielded three main discussion areas. First, nontraditional students identified in an asynchronous online environment did not find the success conditions to be consistently present and experienced the difficulties expressed in the research

when success conditions were absent. Second, nontraditional students expressed that flexibility in their schedule was the key factor leading to their success. They also identified the opportunity to receive a degree from a reputable institution would lead to career enhancement. Lastly, students reported to have developed a strong, productive and positive academic relationship with their advisor. The advisor served as a substitute for faculty-student relationships typically found in a traditional academic environment. The advisor served the primary role for providing academic, social and financial support, which increased the students' institutional affiliation.

The impact of the demographics of the participants on their responses coded in each of the success conditions were also reviewed. These key findings have implications for current practice and for future study.

Key Findings: Integrating Success Conditions in an Online Asynchronous Environment

For each of the success conditions identified by Tinto as important for student success, the students interviewed in this study reported inconsistent or completely lacking opportunities. Experiencing the success conditions through traditional methods that were currently available on campus was not always possible for the nontraditional student population.

In regards to classroom feedback and assessment, most students reported too little feedback and only receiving feedback at the end of the semester. This resulted in students expressing frustration in not knowing what to expect from their classes or from each professor. The inconsistency of the feedback made the improvement process a challenge and often a source of frustration to the online students interviewed in this study. Without feedback, students were confused about their academic standing and success in the class. Without knowing how they

were doing in the class, they became anxious and uncertain if they were doing what was needed to be successful.

Best practices for feedback in the online environment include making sure feedback is "personal, specific, and appropriate, while also immediate" (Steinweg, Williams, & Warren, 2006, p. 9). The importance of feedback beginning with the first online assignments early in the course and sharing grading expectations even before the course begins is most effective (Comer, 2013). Therefore, each professor in the online classroom should establish expectations about feedback. If consistent feedback happens in every class, students can be prepared and adjust accordingly. Positive and corrective feedback is appreciated and necessary to foster growth in the education of the nontraditional learner.

Calsolaro Smulsky (2012) found similar results with online nontraditional students, indicating, "that students feel the frequency of their interactions with faculty is not where they would like it to be, but they are satisfied with the actual interaction that does occur" (p. 61). This seems consistent with the findings of the current study, as students remained positive when they could report on a positive feedback experience even when most experiences were negative. Several researchers (Calsolaro Smulsky, 2012; Espasa & Meneses, 2010) suggest institutions should provide additional teacher training on the subject of feedback, establishing minimum requirements for frequency and types of feedback. While a minimum requirement may be helpful, this researcher suggests striving for a maximum amount of feedback as an online best practice to serve the needs of the adult learner. Institutions can ensure appropriate feedback by more carefully monitoring online faculty and establishing guidelines for online course feedback. The institution can determine if feedback guidelines are most appropriate to be determined by each department or each faculty member, with the understanding that a minimum feedback guideline may be necessary. Espasa and Meneses (2010) agreed that feedback "is indispensable

in the case of adult learners and asynchronous teaching and learning environments because it allows students to progressively become more autonomous in their learning" (p. 278).

Specific recommendations about online undergraduate student expectations of feedback were explored in another recent study. Bailie (2014) found that

> students participating in this study indicated that faculty should respond to an email inquiry from a student within 12 hours of receipt, and a voicemail within 12 to 24 hours of receipt. Participants in this study also favored a response time of 3 days for the return of a minor assignment and 1 week for a major assignment (para. 27).

While this may seem like a quick turnaround time, the students experience in the current study supports the need for timely feedback. Also, students knowing the schedule for feedback in advance allows for consistency in experiences across classes, something participants in the study struggled with. Timely, constructive feedback allows the students to make adjustments and seek additional help from faculty or other services, when needed.

Adult students are willing to listen to how they can improve and be more successful in their academic pursuits. The students interviewed for this study wanted to be successful, and that means knowing how they are progressing in each class they are enrolled in. Tinto (2009) suggests that, "Early-warning systems, for instance, typically employ information about students' classroom progress to trigger academic support when it is needed to help students succeed in the classroom" (p. A33). This research suggests that the faculty or advisor receiving the early warning should be trained specifically on nontraditional students' needs and unique situations and be able to personalize feedback.

Feedback and assessment will be different in the face-to-face environment, but innovative and creative ways are beginning to emerge as advances in online education and technology progress. Tinto (2014) recently suggested leveraging technology as "web-based assessment with predictive analytics not only ensure early warning, but also enable such systems to be sustained and scaled up to a larger array of classrooms" (p. 4). These types of web-based classroom assessments can be used frequently and deliver feedback to both the student and faculty so that a discussion about the necessary improvements in academic progress can take place.

Interestingly, some researchers fault new technology in the expectations of such quick feedback from faculty. Bailie (2014) suggests that the marketing of online programs as accessible 24 hours a day as well as the increase of cell phone usage and other instant forms of communication may be influencing these expectations of timeliness and responsiveness. "Many students campus-based or online—need, and want, support services to be student-centered and available to them 24/7/365" (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013, p. 7). While -round-the-clock services may not be possible, they dodo force student services administrators to reconsider the manner in which their services are delivered, especially for the nontraditional student who has other responsibilities during business hours when most offices are normally open.

A support service that participants in the current study reported to be lacking was an online orientation and other online support programs. Participants in the study struggled to remember if they had any type of orientation online and only one student remembered attending an event that took place on campus. Yet, not all online students are in geographic proximity to the campus. The lack of online support services ties into questions about assessment and feedback upon entry, where the experiences were fairly consistent with only two students reporting needing proficiency tests in English or math, and one in computer literacy. Therefore,

it might be difficult to say if an orientation program, including computer literacy, would be beneficial as it was not a part of the experience for these students. However, to familiarize students with the higher education expectations at the beginning of their education and in conjunction with student support services, most students would benefit from some type of orientation.

For students who are enrolled in fully online degree programs, orientation may serve as not only a place to meet peers virtually, but also gain experience with the learning management system (LMS). Scagnoli (2001) agrees that "orientation for online courses serve the same objectives as orientation for college, in the sense that it can facilitate academic and social interactions, increase student involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community, and help retention" (p. 20). Therefore, if institutions offering fully online degrees want to increase overall student satisfaction, online orientation should be seen as the antecedent to all other aspects of the educational experience. Online orientation can be seen as the first step in which a student finds success and that orientation leads to all other areas of the students' online educational path. Britto and Rush (2013) concur, noting "an online orientation familiarizing students with the online course learning environment is one of the greatest factors in predicting a student's success in an online course" (p. 31).

If not in an orientation, the virtual classroom will be the first point of feedback to the nontraditional student about how to achieve progress towards their academic goals. It is necessary for institutions to address their nontraditional students' needs in the classroom. Faculty may need additional support from the institution to implement minimum feedback guidelines in online courses. Additional training should be provided to faculty to understand the challenges of the nontraditional student. In working with this group of students, faculty may find

creative ways to use technology to make improvements in the experiences and implement success conditions for online nontraditional students.

Expectations of Nontraditional Students in Online Education

Attitude and belief in one's own abilities can play an important role in whether a student is indeed successful. Self-efficacy is an important belief that each student possesses in different degrees. Renowned Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura (1982) defines self-efficacy as ones' judgment "whether or not they are capable of performing various activities" (p. 195). Three primary behavioral outcomes influenced by self-efficacy beliefs are: (a) approach versus avoidance, (b) performance, and (c) persistence (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Therefore, if student self-efficacy can be increased in a higher education setting, students should be more likely to approach academic tasks, perform to the best of their ability, and persist through their classes and degree program.

By entering school or returning to school, perhaps for training or after a major life change, nontraditional students may have very different beliefs about their ability to complete their program. Students who enter college with lower beliefs in their ability and capability to be successful would benefit from additional support services, such as mentoring and advising. According to Mattern and Shaw (2010), "self-efficacy can also be raised or lowered through comments or feedback from others" (p. 666). The feedback provided by others, such as faculty, has already been discussed as a best practice. The possible increase to a students' self-efficacy is an additional benefit to providing such feedback.

This is an important concept for faculty, staff, and university student services to provide the support, academic, and counseling services to increase a students' self-efficacy. Nontraditional students often have competing interests outside the classroom. Since some

nontraditional students may have already had an unsuccessful academic experience, as many reported in the current study, increasing self-efficacy beliefs could be crucial for future success. Dewitz et al. (2009) found that increased self-efficacy can contribute to increased retention and eventual degree completion. Reducing attrition, especially in online degree programs, remains the goal of many higher education institutions. Student services offices and staff could potentially develop personalized support based on a students' self-efficacy.

Students in the current study shared their desire for a degree in order to provide them additional career opportunities. When asked about their expectations, participants reported on how the institution would support them, faculty expectations and their own personal expectations. Their personal expectations centered around main themes of participants expecting to do well, often explicitly saying they were motivated to do better than their first time in college. Participants were realistic about workload understanding it would be substantial and require considerable time commitment. Participants reported expectations about the institution and how its reputation would enhance their own advancement. This prestige contributed to their motivation do well and succeed at this institution, as they expected earning a degree from this institution would assist in future career opportunities.

Degree completion and subsequent career opportunities were motivating factors for these nontraditional students. While most of Tinto's success conditions were absent from this educational environment, students remained satisfied with their experiences reporting that the motivating factors were degree completion and career enhancement. Institutions usually try to foster student engagement to improve student success, but this group of students did not expect to make friends or join clubs; they wanted to be academically successful and get the degree needed for future employment. Since their personal expectations were being fulfilled, students

still reported being satisfied overall with the experiences in the asynchronous degree program (see Figure 14).

Another expectation in the online degree program is that it is asynchronous and provides the flexibility in scheduling the nontraditional learner requires. The nontraditional learner is typically employed and has family responsibilities, such as raising children. The students in this study also related satisfaction with the flexibility of the asynchronous format. While they lambasted the format for being crippling to developing relationships, the participants also vehemently opposed face-to-face sessions that might interfere with the flexibility they needed to balance all their competing priorities.

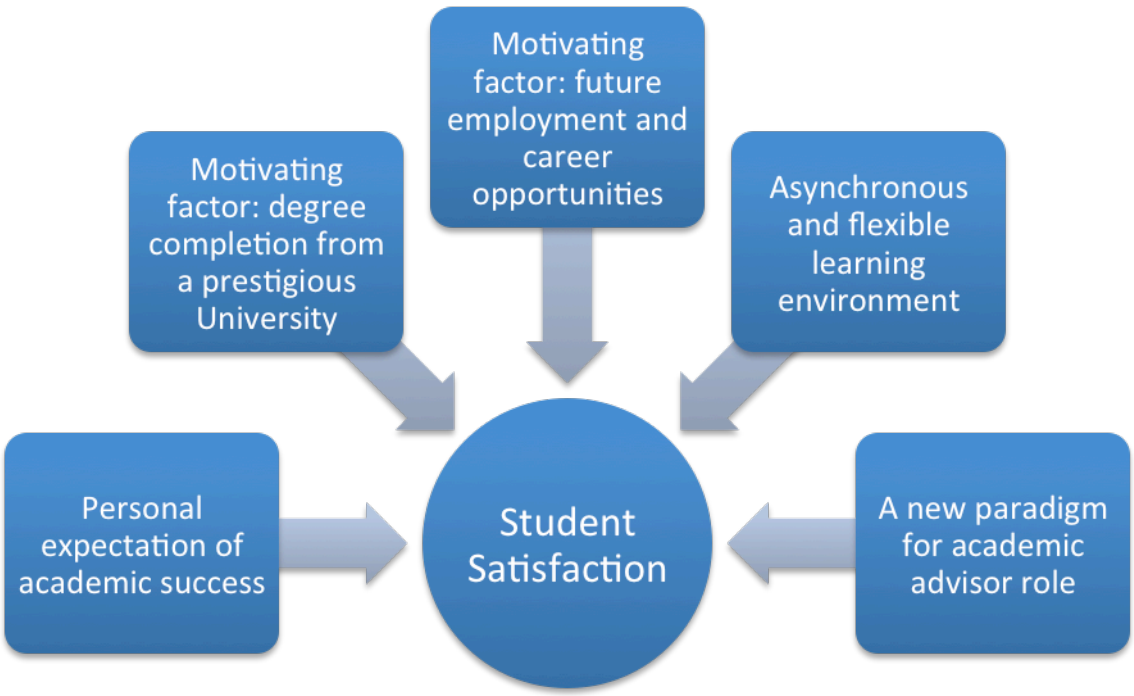

Figure 14. The factors leading to student satisfaction for nontraditional online students.

Figure 15. The cycle of feedback, support and growth for the nontraditional student.

The main themes around the success conditions of expectations, feedback, and support may be overlapping in some regard. Students expected to be challenged academically based on the institutional reputation, but they also expected they would be successful because they believed they had learned from their previous, unsuccessful attempts. Students also wanted more consistent and timely feedback to be sure they were meeting the academic challenges. Positive and constructive feedback helps a student make the necessary adjustments to be academically successful. However, the university also needs to be prepared to provide the support to faculty and students to be successful in the online program. In particular, in an online program with adult, nontraditional students, support is necessary to follow up if feedback shows more support is needed in certain areas. The university will need to be prepared to provide support in nontraditional and online formats to meet the demands of this growing student body. As shown

in Figure 15, this cycle of feedback, support, and growth is necessary in the academic experience of the nontraditional online student.

A New Paradigm of Academic Relationships

In this study, students spoke of their academic advisor as the singular most important person in providing support. Students reported receiving support in academic, social, and financial areas. The advisor was often the person to email about scholarship opportunities and assist with applications, as well as academic and course advisement. In this particular program, the advisor was clearly the greatest single source of support for these students in many areas not typically associated with the traditional academic advisor role. Strayhorn (2015) summed up the critical role of the advisor:

> Academic advising is arguably one of the most critical functional areas in all of higher education. It is the primary touch point where students access information, resources, and tools to navigate successfully through college. It is where students learn the rules of this culture—what a credit hour is, how many credits each course carries, the number of credits required for a major, minor, or (ultimately) graduation. Academic advising is where students go for advice about their futures, their paths to purposeful lives, and their progress through college. (p. 61)

The importance of the advisor cannot be understated, and is supported by the findings of the current study. Gravel (2012) emphasizes, "student support services comprise one of the essential components of any successful online degree program, and online students and student-advisor interaction is a critical element in student retention" (p. 58).

Creative uses of technology can be used to make improvements to the advisor role. Britto and Rush (2013) found great success implementing an online advisor system. The success

of the program, which demonstrated the need for online advisors, forced the institution to hire seven additional advisors in just one year after the program launched to meet student demand. They also found on campus students requesting online advisor services, for the convenience and availability of advisors after the advising office was closed. Nolan (2013) adds that academic advising preferences from students included having the same person throughout their college career. As for online students, their advisor can be their primary bond to the institution. In addition, Hunte (2012) posits that, "student support services positively impact learners' performance in the online teaching and learning environment" (p. 195).

Challenges that students face in their academic careers can be met with the right support in online student success. In addition to the busy lives of nontraditional students, they often need assistance to be academically successful, especially if they are returning to school after some time away and need to balance their other life responsibilities. "Effective and easily accessible student support services are essential to the success of adult learners" (Dolan, Donohue, Holstrom, Pernell, & Sachdev, 2009, p. 90). Online orientation can begin to establish the path to success by introducing students to the learning management system, support systems, and online resources, as well as their peers, faculty, and advisor. The advisor role has been shown to be the singularly most important piece of support to this participant group. Advising offices that work with online nontraditional students should be aware of their needs and staff should be specifically trained to meet the needs of this student population. Staff and support services should be available beyond traditional office hours to meet the scheduling needs of the nontraditional student.

Updating the way student support services are delivered is a recommendation for future practice. The implications of the study findings for policy and practice are far reaching as

institutions continue to increase online degree offerings. Institutions can use the findings in several ways and with several offices on campus that interact and influence online nontraditional student success. Institutions may also need to consider online methods to provide these services, for example, via text or online chat.

Additionally, the research investigated students' perceptions regarding if engagement experiences occurred in academic and social areas, with faculty and peers. Some participants reported difficulty in engaging in the asynchronous environment, that engagement with peers and/or faculty was limited in the depth of interactions and timing delays in communication. However, when specifically asked if they would prefer synchronous classes, this particular student population was unwilling to give up the convenience of asynchronous classes that enables them to meet their responsibilities outside of school. This population was not motivated by the same success condition. With research showing how engagement and involvement can increase retention, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) suggest, "helping these students to recognize the value of investing in social relationships in the community could be an important objective for the university" (p. 50). Institutions will need to be creative in developing student sense of belonging and finding the unique success factors for the nontraditional online student.

Engagement with faculty and peers in the online environment is often seen as a challenge, one that can be resolved through effective pedagogical practices. Group work assignments are frequently used to encourage involvement with peers. "Interaction with others (e.g., peers and instructors) is important for success in online learning environments; therefore, students need to know how to interact skillfully with others to pursue academic online activities that require it" (Cho, 2012, p. 1052). Jacobs (2014) reviewed some of the many benefits of group projects including increasing interpersonal skills, communication skills, and relationship

development with peers in an online environment. The researcher further explains that group projects can increase retention, by supporting integration into the academic environment and increasing the institutional commitment of the student (Jacobs, 2014). Faculty will need to be trained on best practices of facilitating group projects and find ways to foster relationship building in the online environment without overwhelming the nontraditional student with additional responsibilities.

Developing the nontraditional online student "sense of inclusion, community, and identity is not only a desirable outcome, but an essential component of creating an effective online learning environment," according to Cuthbertson and Falcone (2014, p. 223). Wyatt (2011) confirms, "it is imperative that institutional leaders become more effective in integrating and engaging the population of nontraditional students into the collegiate environment" (p. 10). Research has shown a sense of belonging and social integration in the university lead to persistence and retention (Brooman & Darwent, 2014; Flynn, 2014; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). In fact, Flynn's (2014) study provides support for Tinto's work and statement that, "the more students are academically and socially engaged, the more likely they are to persist and graduate" (Tinto, 2010, p. 70).

Overall, receiving social support through traditional methods that were currently available on campus activities was not always possible for this group of students, due to convenience, geographic proximity, lack of information, or a primary focus on academics. Some nontraditional online students perceive that they have had a different, and lesser, engagement experience. The university needs to find ways for all students to be included in activities, especially if they are online students, nontraditional, or do not live near the campus. This study is based on one college within the university, which is marketed to busy, adult students. The

college needs to continue to find appropriate and helpful ways to involve the online nontraditional student without overwhelming them with more to fit into their already busy lives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Implement high impact practices. Some of the student success conditions found in this study are reminiscent of the work done by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) on high impact practices (n.d.). The AAC&U website, www.aacu.org, lists 10 practices that educators and institutions can put into practice to increase student engagement and increase retention. According to Kuh (2008), these practices include such activities as first-year seminars and learning communities, challenging academic work like writing intensive courses, collaborative projects and undergraduate research, or academic and social experiences such as service learning or studying abroad. While some of the high impact practices can be seen in the current study, institutions should consider the research on high impact practices and how to incorporate them into the student experience as they further develop online curriculum and online degree programs.

Price and Tovar (2014) compared the high impact practices to data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). In their review in 2007of over 166,000 student records from 261 community colleges, they found student engagement is a positive predictor of graduation rates. Specifically, their research found "active and collaborative learning in a supportive institutional environment for learners—can result in higher graduation rates" (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 779). Active and collaborative learning in the online environment could lead to increased engagement with faculty, peers, and coursework. Group work and/or collaborative projects may be one way to implement this practice in the online environment.

Sandeen (2012) also stresses the importance of high impact practices. While she states that most research is based on traditional residential students, the high impact practices that increase persistence and retention still need to be considered in their applicability to the online education format. In her study on continuing education students, she suggests that some online programs are intentionally including high impact practices in their program development. Sandeen mentioned the same institution in which the current study took place as a good example of the implementation of high impact practices in online degree programs.

Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) conducted a study involving over 4,000 students from the incoming class of 17 different institutions. While they found some of the high impact practices to have a greater effect on student learning than others, overall they concluded that high impact practices are beneficial to undergraduate student learning. Institutions should consider which practices could have the most impact on their student body in developing and implementing high impact practices.

Investigate local success of high impact practices. It may be valuable to consider which practices could be easiest for faculty to implement in the classroom and get support from the faculty in an implementation plan. However, this researcher cautions that consideration should be given to the student body and method of delivery, as this study has shown that the online, nontraditional student has some different needs and challenges from on campus students. Program evaluations could help determine which high impact practices are useful for them.

Recommendations for Further Study

Some recommendations for further study have already been discussed in each of the key findings. Additional recommendations are included here as suggestions to further explore nontraditional undergraduate online student success.

Participants in this study were often not aware of best practices or potential resources until they were asked about them in the interviews. Institutions would benefit from a complete analysis and finding a way to seek student input. Most students in this study wanted to give constructive feedback about the program, just as they wanted feedback on their own progress.

Student perceptions of their experiences are valuable for institutions to actively seek out and consider when making program improvements. Based on the limitations of this study, the researcher would suggest replication of the research method with additional students and at various institutions, specifically public and private institutions in other geographic areas of the country for comparison. More perspectives brought into the discussion can only contribute to the richness of the data and provide a better understanding on what the nontraditional student needs to be successful in an online degree program.

The researcher also had limited participation with ethic groups and with a variety of ethnicities. The researcher would suggest specifically targeting the study to institutions serving underrepresented minorities, historically black colleges and universities, and Hispanic-serving institutions to provide more rich detail to the student experience.

The researcher is aware that the participants in the study have had success in the online degree program and may have found the support necessary to increase their beliefs in their abilities. This study did not include those who had dropped out of the program. One suggestion for further study would be to interview those who dropped out of the online degree program about their experiences. Another suggestion for further study would be to administer pretests on self-efficacy for students entering an online degree program to determine if a relationship occurs with persistence or degree completion. Student services offices and staff could potentially develop personalized support based on a students' self-efficacy.

The researcher found that adult students in particular want to be heard and contribute to their education, but they have busy lives with the competing priorities of work, family, and school. Perhaps more easily accessible ways of completing the questionnaire, such as online, would yield a greater sample size. It may be possible to have students rate experiences on each success condition on a Likert scale survey. Also, being able to replicate the study with the inclusion of quantitative data may be interesting to review if any of the findings are statistically significant.

Overall, receiving social support through traditional methods that were currently available on campus activities was not always possible for this group of students, due to convenience, geographic proximity, lack of information, or a primary focus on academics. Institutions need to leverage technology and find creative ways for students to be able to participate in activities.

Each of the success conditions (expectations, feedback, support, engagement) should be reconsidered through the lens of the nontraditional online student. Expectations can continue to be accurately managed through honest marketing materials and institutional reputation. In this study, nontraditional students' expectations were found to be very different from traditional, residential students. Institutions need to assess what would best serve their own student body. Expectations can also refer to the academic expectations in each class. Related closely with feedback, a student may expect a course to be conducted in one manner, but as participants in this study found classes can all be conducted differently. Faculty guidelines for minimum feedback may need to be considered by an institution striving to meet this best practice.

Additionally, an online orientation program could assist students in understanding expectations. Orientation could be offered in the virtual format and could be in modules where

the busy nontraditional student could log in and complete parts at a time more convenient to their schedules. Support services can be made available through online chats or text at times when offices are no longer open. This researcher would recommend extended services, especially academic advisors at the current study site. Since the advisor role has already been established as the primary source of support and engagement, this institution should continue to find ways to benefit students with this service. Other institutions may need to determine who provides students with support and has the positive relationship and commitment to their success, and be sure those in the role are familiar with the nontraditional and/or online student challenges.

Summary

Overall, the researcher sought to examine the nontraditional online students' perceptions of Tinto's four student success conditions: expectations, support, assessment, and engagement. Expectations include those of the student, the faculty, and the institution. Support includes academic, social, and financial support. Providing early and meaningful assessment and feedback to students is crucial during their educational career. The fourth success condition in Tinto's model includes the involvement or engagement of students with their peers and faculty in both academic and social contexts. Nontraditional student perceptions of each of these institutional conditions of success was uncovered through oral questionnaires, interviews, course syllabi, and website artifacts.

The findings showed that Tinto's success conditions were not the same success conditions needed by this group of nontraditional online students. These students were motivated by wanting to do well academically at a prestigious institution, with the ultimate goal of improving their career or employment opportunities. They were not as concerned with social activities or developing peer relationships, but did make the connection to the university through

their academic advisor. This unique and multifaceted role of the advisor linked students to support resources while also providing a social connection to the school itself. These busy adult students needed flexibility to balance their schoolwork with outside obligations of their career, spouse, and children. The students themselves showed that to be successful in an online degree program, one needs to be motivated, determined, organized, and have good time management skills.

The researcher hopes this study will provide a rich, detailed description of the lived experience of the nontraditional online student to add to the paucity of research on this understudied population and that the findings of this study contribute to additional improvements in online education for the growing population of nontraditional students seeking additional educational pursuits.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-structured Interview

Now, we are going to spend about an hour discussing your experiences as a nontraditional, online student. I'd like as much detail as possible to fully understand your experiences.

Expectations

I'd like to begin by explaining what *Expectations* **are***:* "The expectations that a student holds about attending college (e.g., what the student expects to get out of college, the experiences the student expects to have in college) and about his or her abilities, strengths, and weaknesses" (Woodard, Mallory, & DeLuca, 2001, p. 61).

1. What were your own expectations about the program before you started?
2. Tell me about how you're meeting your expectations?

   Possible probing questions:

   Have those expectations changed and if so, in what ways? Are you meeting those expectations? What type of support did you get to meet them? Are these still important to you?

3. What do you think the faculty expects of you? Of all online students?
4. Are the institutional expectations accurate? Is the institution represented accurately?

Support

For the purpose of this study, we define *Support* **as***:* The academic, social and financial assistance that a student may receive either from themselves, their family, or from their academic institution.

5. What types of academic support have you used, and can you tell me about them?

Possible probing questions: What are your experiences with academic support programs such as orientation? First year programs? Mentoring? Coaching? Academic advising? Specific online support? Faculty support?

6. Did you experience social support or encouragement to participate in social activities?
7. What types of support have you received for funding your education?

Possible probing questions: Did you get scholarships? Student loans? Did the institution help you with financial forms?

Assessment

By *Assessment (or Feedback)*, **I am referring to***:* when "Faculty members give students frequent, immediate, corrective, and supportive feedback on their performance" (Woodard, Mallory, DeLuca, 2001, p. 67). Assessment should also include institutional self-assessment to determine if educational goals are successfully being met.

8. Tell me about the type of academic feedback you experienced?
9. Did you have to take any entrance test or online computer proficiency exams?
10. How do you perceive classroom feedback?
11. What is your experience with any institutional assessments?
12. Did you receive any social feedback or suggestions to modify any behaviors?

Engagement

I'd like to give you a definition of *Engagement (or Involvement):* "an important means by which students develop feelings about their peers, professors, and institutions that give them a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging while simultaneously offering rich opportunities for learning and development" (Harper and Quaye, 2008, pp. xxii-xxiii)

13. How did you perceive engagement or involvement?

Possible probing questions: How much time do you spend studying? How interesting is the coursework? Did you participate in outside of class activities or working with classmates outside of class? How much do you participate in class or contribute to class discussions?

14. Tell me about your experiences with cooperative learning?

Possible probing questions: Did you participate in any of the following: Learning communities? Service learning? Internships?

Summary

15. Based on your experiences, what would you tell an adult student is needed to be successful in online education?
16. Did you ever consider leaving the program and what prompted you to stay?
17. Do you have any additional comments you would like to make?

Thank you again for your time in contributing to the research on online education.

APPENDIX B

Sociodemographic Survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please note that the information collected in this questionnaire is completely confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research study. Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible. Please note that you may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.

Pseudonym (to protect confidentiality)_____

Current Age _____

Gender_____

Race/Ethnicity_____

Employed_____How many hours a week? _____

Marital Status_____

Dependents_____Number of and Ages of children?

Enrollment Status_____Full time/part time?

How long have you been enrolled in the program_____

Receiving financial aid_____Grants, loans, scholarship?

Educational Goals- Primary reason for enrolling in college_____

_____

_____

Thank you for completing the first part of the questionnaire! Your time and participation are very much appreciated and will contribute to a growing knowledge base on experiences surrounding nontraditional online students.

APPENDIX C

Sample Email to Participants

Dear Student,

Would you like to share your student experience and contribute to research about online students? My name is Carrie Prendergast and I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University. I want to interview adult students (age 24 or older) about their experience as an online student. While some research exists, more research on adult students is important for colleges and universities to improve their services to students like you. Please see the attached information sheet for more information about the study.

Do you want your story to be heard? Will you spend an hour with me talking about your experience?

If interested, please email me at [removed for publication] or call my cell at [removed for publication] and we can set up a time to talk.

Thanks,

Carrie Prendergast

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

(adapted from Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012)

Research Description:

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the nontraditional online student experience. Your participation in this study requires an interview in which you will be asked about your opinions and perceptions relative to your experience in your online degree program. The duration of the interview will be approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed in order to capture and maintain an accurate record of the discussion. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected, you will be referred to only as a pseudonym.

The researcher, Carrie Prendergast, a doctoral candidate at Pepperdine University will conduct the study. The interview will be arranged at a mutually convenient time and manner (by phone, Skype/Google chat, or in person).

Risks and Benefits

This research will hopefully contribute to understanding of the nontraditional online student experience and so the potential benefit of this study is improvement of higher education practice. Participation in this study carries minimal risk, such as boredom or anxiousness, typical of that individuals will encounter during a usual classroom activity. There is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study.

Data Storage to Protect Confidentiality

Under no circumstances whatsoever will you be identified by name in the course of this research study, or in any publication. Every effort will be made that all information provided by you will be treated as strictly confidential. All data will be coded and securely stored, and will be used for professional purposes only.

How the Results will be Used

This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentations(s) and/or educational publication(s).

Participant Rights

- I have read and discussed the research description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures of this study.
- My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without any jeopardy.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, Carrie Prendergast, who will answer my questions. The researcher can be reached at [removed for publication]. I may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Bortman at [removed for publication].

- If at any time I have comments or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Graduate and Professional School IRB Office, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Institutional Review Board at (310) 568-5753 or gpsirb@pepperdine.edu.
- I should receive a copy of the Information Sheet and this Participants Rights document.
- Audiotaping/digital recording is a part of this research. Only the principal researcher and the members of the research team will have access to written and recorded materials.

Please verbally tell the primary researcher:

_____I consent to being recorded.

_____I do not consent to being recorded.

My verbal consent indicates my agreement to participate in this study.

Participant's signature_- *not needed to protect participant confidentiality*- _Date____/____/____

Name: (Please print legibly)_____

Investigator's Verification of Explanation

I, Carrie Prendergast, certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and the nature of this research to the participant listed above. He/she has had the opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and he/she provided the affirmative agreement to participate in this research.

Investigator's signature_____Date____/____/____

APPENDIX E

University Permission to Email Participants

Hello Carrie,

I write on behalf of Dennis. We looked into this request. We would be most comfortable sending out the message ourselves to our students. Does that work for you?

All best,
Fiona

From Carrie Prendergast student [removed for publication]
Date: March 22, 2015 at 3:41:12 PM EDT
To: [removed for publication]
Subject: adult online student success- what works?
[removed for publication]
[removed for publication]

RE: Research with adult online students

Dear Dean [removed for publication],

I am writing to you today to seek approval to obtain email addresses of adult students in the online bachelor's degree programs in the School of Professional Studies.

In addition to working as Assistant Director of Enrollment Services in the Silver School of Social Work, I am a doctoral student at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. Under the guidance of Dr. Lisa Bortman, Associate Provost, Office of Institutional Effectiveness, I have completed my dissertation proposal and will be seeking IRB approval through Pepperdine to collect data. My dissertation will examine nontraditional online students' perceptions of Vincent Tinto's four student success conditions: expectations, support, assessment, and engagement. Nontraditional student perceptions of each of these institutional conditions of success will be uncovered through demographic data, interviews, and website artifacts. This study will provide a rich, detailed description of the lived experience of the nontraditional online student to add to the paucity of research on this understudied population. I would be happy to share my findings and dissertation with you.

Participants will complete a signed consent before answering demographic questions and participating in an interview, and will be able to withdraw at any time and without penalty. Please be assured that I have read and will act in accordance with the ethical principles for human research protections.

If you could email preliminary approval for me to collect data on students in the online degree programs, it would be appreciated. Once full IRB approval is received from Pepperdine, I will share that will you. I am only asking for you to provide me with emails of students enrolled in the online bachelor's degree programs. I anticipate trying to contact students in late spring semester and throughout the summer.

If you have any questions or need clarification, please contact me at [contact information omitted for publication] or my dissertation chair, Dr. Bortman at [contact information]. I would be happy to discuss the research on student success and how it may pertain to online students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Carrie Prendergast
Doctoral Candidate in Organizational Leadership
Pepperdine University Graduate School of Educational and Psychology

--
Fiona Jaramillo
Chief of Staff

[removed for publication]
Office of the Dean

APPENDIX F

Demographic Data Compared to Feedback

	Feedback Classroom	Feedback Entry	Feedback Institutional	Feedback Negative	Feedback Positive
Gender = Male	30	10	8	9	17
Gender = Female	32	9	11	15	16
Ethnicity = Caucasian	41	12	9	12	18
Ethnicity = African American	19	6	8	8	14
Ethnicity = Hispanic	1	1	1	2	1
Age = 31-35	26	6	5	4	14
Age = 36-40	8	4	5	8	7
Age = 41-45	4	2	4	4	3
Age = 46-50	11	1	1	0	3
Age = 56-60	5	1	3	2	2
Age = 30 or below	8	5	1	6	4
Dependent Children = One child	11	6	3	10	5
Dependent Children = None	51	13	16	14	28
Employment status = Full time (40hrs/wk)	51	13	14	20	22
Employment status = Part time(<40 hrs/wk)	8	4	4	4	6
Employment status = Volunteering	3	2	1	0	5
Enrollment status = Part time	30	9	10	12	12
Enrollment status = Full time	21	6	8	10	15
Marital Status = Single	25	8	12	11	19
Marital Status = Married	18	9	6	13	9
Marital Status = Separated	19	2	1	0	5

APPENDIX G

Demographic Data Compared to Expectations

	Expect-Faculty	**Expect-Institutional**	**Expect-Personal**	**Expect-Negative**	**Expect-Positive**
Gender = Male	12	14	15	12	18
Gender = Female	11	22	29	21	20
Ethnicity = Caucasian	12	22	24	19	23
Ethnicity = African American	10	13	17	11	14
Ethnicity = Hispanic	0	0	2	2	0
Age = 31-35	5	11	15	13	12
Age = 36-40	9	9	6	4	6
Age = 41-45	4	2	3	4	6
Age = 46-50	0	2	4	1	5
Age = 56-60	1	5	3	4	0
Age = 30 or below	4	7	13	7	9
Dependent Children = One child	9	9	11	5	8
Dependent Children = None	14	27	33	28	30
Employment status = Full time (40+hrs/wk)	19	28	33	23	30
Employment status = Part time(<40 hrs/wk)	2	7	9	9	5
Employment status = Volunteering	2	1	2	1	3
Enrollment status = Part time	9	15	16	16	12
Enrollment status = Full time	12	16	19	10	15
Marital Status = Single	12	14	18	17	15
Marital Status = Married	10	17	19	13	12
Marital Status = Separated	1	5	7	3	11

APPENDIX H

Demographic Data Compared to Support

	Support-Financial	**Support-Academic**	**Support-Social**	**Support-Negative**	**Support-Positive**
Gender = Male	19	36	12	16	26
Gender = Female	21	39	23	18	39
Ethnicity = Caucasian	25	42	17	19	38
Ethnicity = African American	9	28	15	9	22
Ethnicity = Hispanic	2	2	2	2	3
Age = 31-35	14	24	12	12	25
Age = 36-40	13	14	5	10	8
Age = 41-45	3	15	6	6	10
Age = 46-50	3	7	3	1	4
Age = 56-60	3	5	2	2	4
Age = 30 or below	4	10	7	3	14
Dependent Children = One child	12	15	9	10	12
Dependent Children = None	28	60	26	24	53
Employment status = Full time (40 hrs/week)	35	59	29	30	50
Employment status = Part time (<40 hrs/week)	4	11	4	3	12
Employment status = Volunteering	1	5	2	1	3
Enrollment status = Part time	22	34	12	18	28
Enrollment status = Full time	12	28	16	11	21
Marital Status = Single	20	39	15	20	32
Marital Status = Married	12	22	12	9	21
Marital Status = Separated	8	14	8	5	12

APPENDIX I

Demographic Data Compared to Engagement

	Engage Academic	**Engage Faculty**	**Engage Peers**	**Engage Social**	**Engage-Negative**	**Engage Positive**
Gender = Male	43	28	16	17	42	27
Gender = Female	42	37	36	16	42	35
Ethnicity = Caucasian	48	36	22	18	53	36
Ethnicity = African American	26	25	25	10	19	18
Ethnicity = Hispanic	8	2	2	3	4	7
Age = 31-35	29	20	20	10	30	26
Age = 36-40	17	12	6	9	25	8
Age = 41-45	15	14	10	2	13	8
Age = 46-50	9	6	3	6	5	8
Age = 56-60	3	5	5	1	6	3
Age = 30 or below	12	8	8	5	5	9
Dependent Children = One child	14	9	10	9	18	9
Dependent Children = None	71	56	42	24	66	53
Employment status Full time (40hrs/wk)	70	55	41	29	75	52
Employment status Part time (<40 hrs/wk)	11	9	9	2	8	7
Employment status = Volunteering	4	1	2	2	1	3
Enrollment status = Part time	43	29	19	14	46	30
Enrollment status = Full time	27	28	26	16	27	18
Marital Status = Single	44	35	30	13	48	28
Marital Status = Married	25	20	16	12	22	16
Marital Status = Separated	16	10	6	8	14	18

APPENDIX J

GPS IRB Exemption Notice

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

July 8, 2015

Carrie Prendergast
[removed for publication]

Protocol #: E0515D02
Project Title: Non-traditional Online Students Perceptions of Student Success Conditions

Dear Ms. Prendergast:

Thank you for submitting your application, *Non-traditional Online Students Perceptions of Student Success Conditions,* for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Bortman, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) states:

> (b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:
>
> **Category (2) of 45 CFR 46.101**, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

In addition, your application to waive documentation of informed consent has been **approved**.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact Kevin Collins, Manager of the

6100 Center Drive, Los Angeles, California 90045 ▪ 310-568-5600

Institutional Review Board (IRB) at gpsirb@peppderdine.edu. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Thema Bryant-Davis, Ph.D.
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives
Mr. Brett Leach, Regulatory Affairs Specialist
Dr. Lisa Bortman, Faculty Advisor