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The Factors Affecting Undergraduate Retention Among Minority Adult Learners

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THE FACTORS AFFECTING UNDERGRADUATE RETENTION
AMONG MINORITY ADULT LEARNERS

By

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A DISSERTATION
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The Factors Affecting Undergraduate Retention among Minority Adult Learners

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of minority adult learners who have experienced academic difficulty while pursuing their college degree. Participants were asked to reflect on their past educational experiences, the obstacles they faced, their motivation to persist, and any recommendations they could render in an effort to assist other students who may face similar obstacles. Interviews were conducted to give a voice to nine participants who experienced academic difficulty, yet persisted.

To understand the factors that affected undergraduate minority adults, the participants were asked to reflect on their past experiences, obstacles, and their motivation to persist. To guide the study, there were three research questions: (a) What factors do students perceive contributed to their poor academic performance as undergraduate minority adult learners? (b) What past educational experiences do undergraduate minority adult learners believe affected their ability to adapt to college as adults? (c) What psychological needs are most important to undergraduate minority adult learners who experience academic difficulty? Once the data were collected, member checks were conducted and data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative software.

To understand the scope of the participants’ experiences, the conceptual frameworks of Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs were used. From the interviews, four themes emerged: (a) overcoming obstacles, (b) struggling to adapt, (c)
motivation to persist: balancing life, and (d) recommendations to Centrism College. The four themes contained 22 subthemes that provided deeper explanations of the participants’ experiences. This study confirmed that support was essential to the persistence of adult learners both inside and outside of the college environment. This study disconfirmed Tinto’s (2012) idea of committing figurative suicide of one’s culture. This study elaborated on the need for culture and community support. Fostering community at the institution showed the need for faculty/student relationships as an essential part of the retention process. Swail’s theory (2003) was confirmed by findings that understanding the need of inclusion was a key factor for true retention. This study revealed the importance of family and the need for social integration to promote persistence among undergraduate minority adult learners.
University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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Humbly,

Dianna R. Montfort
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

Background ............................................................................................................................................. 3

Purpose of Study ................................................................................................................................... 4

Statement of the Problem ....................................................................................................................... 6

Research Questions ............................................................................................................................... 10

Conceptual Framework ........................................................................................................................... 10

Assumptions .......................................................................................................................................... 11

Limitations ............................................................................................................................................. 12

Scope of the Study ................................................................................................................................. 12

Rationale ............................................................................................................................................... 13

Significance .......................................................................................................................................... 14

Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................................... 15

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 16

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................. 18

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs .................................................................................................................. 19

Physiological Needs ............................................................................................................................... 19

Safety and Security ................................................................................................................................. 20

Belonging and Love Needs .................................................................................................................... 20

Esteem Needs ......................................................................................................................................... 21

Self-actualization ................................................................................................................................... 21

Adult Learner Education .......................................................................................................................... 24
# Geometric Model and Hierarchy of Needs

Factors of the Geometric Model

- Cognitive Factors
- Social Factors
- Institutional Factors

Conclusion

## CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

Institutional Demographics

Phenomenology

Setting

Population

Participants/Sample

Data

Participant Selection

Research Questions

Analysis

Provisions for Subject and Data Confidentiality

Participant Rights

Limitations of the Study

Statement of Potential Research Benefits to Subjects

Conclusion

## CHAPTER FOUR RESULTS

Brief Review of Methodology
Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................................. 60
Coding .......................................................................................................................................................... 61
Organization .................................................................................................................................................. 61
Interpretation ............................................................................................................................................... 62
Introduction of Participants ......................................................................................................................... 62
Peyton ............................................................................................................................................................ 63
Denise ........................................................................................................................................................... 63
Alex ............................................................................................................................................................... 63
Mrs. Pierre ..................................................................................................................................................... 64
Dominique .................................................................................................................................................... 64
Paul ............................................................................................................................................................... 64
Allison ............................................................................................................................................................ 64
Priscilla .......................................................................................................................................................... 65
Mrs. Pat ......................................................................................................................................................... 65
Research Questions and Results .................................................................................................................. 65
Tell me about yourself ................................................................................................................................. 66
Overcoming Obstacles ................................................................................................................................. 70
Family as an obstacle .................................................................................................................................. 70
Being unsure ................................................................................................................................................. 73
Health issues ................................................................................................................................................ 75
Struggling to adapt ....................................................................................................................................... 77
I wasn’t prepared ......................................................................................................................................... 77
Childhood labeling ....................................................................................................................................... 78
Interpretation of Findings ........................................................................................................ 104

Research Question One ........................................................................................................... 105

  Lack of preparation ........................................................................................................... 105

  Online courses ............................................................................................................... 105

  Testing skills .................................................................................................................. 106

  Health issues .................................................................................................................. 106

  Family as an obstacle ..................................................................................................... 107

Research Question Two ........................................................................................................ 108

  Childhood labeling ......................................................................................................... 108

  Being unsure ................................................................................................................... 109

  Parenthood ..................................................................................................................... 110

  Professional experience ................................................................................................. 111

Research Question Three ................................................................................................... 111

  Love and belonging ....................................................................................................... 112

  Self-actualization ............................................................................................................ 113

  Security .......................................................................................................................... 113

  Esteem ............................................................................................................................ 114

  Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs ......................................................................................... 115

  Swail’s Geometric Model .............................................................................................. 116

Implications .......................................................................................................................... 117

Recommendations for Action ............................................................................................... 120

Recommendations for Further Study .................................................................................. 124

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 125
References ................................................................................................................................. 127
Appendix A Recruitment Email to Students ............................................................................. 139
Appendix B Consent for Participation in Research .................................................................... 140
Appendix C Semi-structured Interviews .................................................................................... 143
Appendix D Pre-interview Questionnaire .................................................................................. 145
Appendix E Participant Demographics Matrix .......................................................................... 147
Appendix F Interview Script ..................................................................................................... 148
Appendix G Variations on Model Stability ................................................................................ 149
Appendix H Letter of Consent-Department of Student Success .................................................. 150
Appendix I Letter of Consent-Orlando Campus ...................................................................... 151
Appendix J Letter of Consent-Columbia College Protection of Human Subjects Committee .... 152
Appendix K Coding & Categorizing Using NVivo ................................................................. 153
Appendix L Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs NVivo ................................................................. 154
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Higher education has become a safe haven for many adults, as the demand for college-educated employees continues to dominate the job market. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 29% of adults ages 25 or older had at least a baccalaureate degree. Racially, 52% of this population were Asian/Pacific Islander, 33% were White, 20% Black, 13% Hispanic, and 15% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native. The report also noted that the unemployment rates were considerably higher for minority groups. Among the minority groups, Hispanics reflected 8% of the unemployed population, Blacks 9%, American Indian/Alaska Natives 10%, and persons of multiple races were 10%. In contrast, Whites and Asians both had a 4% unemployment rate. The statistics in the report linked the lack of education with higher unemployment rates per racial group.

Of the 9% of unemployed Blacks, 22% did not have a high school diploma or equivalent in comparison to the 11% with high school credentials and the 4% with a baccalaureate degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). With more adult students entering or reentering postsecondary education, understanding their needs and what motivates them are important for faculty and staff. Poor academic performance in primary and secondary schools can create problems throughout the life of adults even when pursuing higher education (Needham, Crosnoe, & Muller, 2004). The authors asserted that academic struggles could indicate behavioral problems, the danger of dropping out, or discouragement of educational and occupational efforts as adults (as cited in Crosnoe 2002). Adults who strive to overcome their educational obstacles may still find themselves struggling to adjust in an academic environment because of past experiences. Isserlis (2008) revealed that adult learners who have experienced abuse and past
failures, along with the ordinary stress of being an adult, often struggle with their inabilities to comprehend and do not fully engage in the classroom. This often leads to preconceived assumptions of deficit thinking. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis (as cited by Phillips, 2007) asserted that people in poverty “create a unique, self-sustaining lifestyle or way of life marked by a host of negative values, norms, and social practices” (p. 115).

This dissertation sought to add to the body of literature by bridging the gap between undergraduate minority adult learners, adult learner retention, and academic difficulty. The researcher conducted a study at one of the 36 extended campuses of a mid-sized, private college based in the Midwest. This campus is located in an urbanized area in Central Florida. The institution was referred to as Centrism College, and the specific location was referred to as the Centrism College-Central Florida Campus. For the purpose of this dissertation, the students, campus, and the institution have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Centrism College was founded in the 1800s as a women’s Christian college and later became a traditional coed college. The college has two divisions; the original residential campus in the rural Midwest and 36 extended locations. The extended locations are in 13 states and specialize in the education of adult learners (Centrism College, 2014). At the time of this study, Centrism College was experiencing a decrease in student enrollment. Although new adult learners were interested in attending the college, issues in retention made it difficult to sustain new students and current students who experienced academic difficulty. In the past, equilibrium has been the status quo of the college. Yet, as Wheatley (2006) stated, “Equilibrium is neither the goal nor the fate of living systems. Disturbances could create disequilibrium; disequilibrium could lead to growth” (pp. 78-79). Centrism College and the extended campuses were experiencing disequilibrium at the time of the study. Swail et al. (2003) wrote, “When equilibrium is lost, students risk reducing their
academic and social integration with the institution and therefore risk stopping or dropping out” (p. 80).

As higher education continues to appeal to adult learners, leaders at institutions such as Centrism College will need to acknowledge that deficit thinking exists but also find a way to combat it. This study focused on identifying the factors affecting undergraduate minority adult learners to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of these students. In addition, it was important to identify the essential psychological needs that contributed to their persistence after a period of academic difficulty and create recommendations to help with the retention of undergraduate minority adult learners.

**Background**

Adult learners are entering higher education at a rapid pace, which creates revenue for colleges and universities nationwide. With the increase of adult learners in higher education, it was essential to address their unique educational needs. The U.S. Department of Education reported that the enrollment of traditional-aged students and those age 25 and over both increased by 35%. From 2012-2023, the National Center for Education Statistics projected a rate increase of 20% for students age 25 and over (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Each year, colleges and universities host commencement ceremonies across the country. Thousands of nontraditional students walk across the various ceremonial stages with a sense of pride, confidence, and accomplishment. Many of these students were the first in their families to receive a degree.

Beyond family and friends, students have expressed their gratitude to the institution for their support, programming, and advising services. An example from a student at the Centrism College-Central Florida campus, “Thank you for all you have done. You truly are a great and
fantastic advisor” (internal communication, adult learner, December 7, 2015) validates the need for institutions to utilize advising services to serve their student populations better.

The term academic advising has been redefined over the past few decades. According to Gordon, Habley, and Grites (2008), academic advising began to emerge in the late 1800s. The authors gathered documentation from Harvard University, and noted, at that time, students and staff shared the same living quarters, and all students took the same courses; elective courses were not available. The authors noted that the president and limited professors, taught, tutored, disciplined, cleaned, cooked, and provided direction to the students. The idea of the campus life mirrored that of a boarding school with a familial structure. Later, it was deemed impractical to have a president living among the students, so institutions employed more faculty and staff. Later, advising became the responsibility of faculty members based on their advisees’ specific academic disciplines. Yet, they solely registered and scheduled courses for the student. This way of advising left little time for faculty to address the students’ educational concerns, apprehensions, or personal goals. Gordon et al. (2008) explained the transformation of academic advising by researching several different authors who gave their perspectives on the topic. Gordon et al. (2008) later compiled a list of various advising models that emerged since the 1800s. One of the advising models mentioned was the self-contained model, defined as “advising for all students from the point of enrollment to the point of departure is done by staff in a centralized unit” (Gordon et al., 2008, p. 8).

Purpose of Study

A study conducted by Anderson (2011) at a private Midwest college focused on student backgrounds, academic characteristics, and satisfaction upon retention of adult learners. Anderson asserted additional research was needed to determine which specific aspects of
advising were effective in the retention process (Anderson, 2011). The purpose of this study was similar, which was to identify the factors that motivate undergraduate minority adult learners to persist after a period of academic difficulty and investigate the relationship between their motivation and poor academic performance while linking their needs to the institution’s role in the retention process. A psychological approach was employed to address the motivational needs that adult learners have outside of the institution. Centrism College has recently taken an interest in addressing the retention needs of the adult learner population but does not have a solid plan in place. This situation further supports the need for this qualitative study, which explored what would cause students to experience academic difficulty, and what retention strategies could have been developed and implemented through academic advising services. Adults usually decide to pursue their college education in response to personal or professional life changes. Researchers have agreed that adult learners, unlike traditional students, enter college for more complex reasons, such as career changes or even considering a second career following a retirement (Schultz & Adams, 2007; as cited in Wolfson, Cavanagh, & Kraiger, 2014).

Adult learners often have additional responsibilities that make it more difficult for them to obtain their degree in a traditional learning environment. The National Center for Education Statistics lists several basic characteristics when defining an adult learner; these include individuals who have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education and are financially independent of parents and work full-time while enrolled. Other characteristics included individuals with dependents other than a spouse, single parents, those lacking a standard high school diploma, and/or those attending school part-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).
It is equally important to include those adult learners who were unemployed while attending school, those who were in the military, married, and those with prior college experience. Penn State University defined adult learners as veterans of the armed services or active-duty; returning to school after four or more years of employment or homemaking; or a person who identifies as a parent, spouse/partner, or employee (“Commission for Adult Learners,” 2015).

There have been limited studies concerning how the external responsibilities of adult learners have affected students’ motivation and retention in relation to academic advising. However, Schreiner (2009) linked satisfaction, motivation, and retention to the educational success of students in higher education. Most research in this area focused on traditional students rather than adult learners. Traditional students were those who had recently graduated from high school and were usually supported by a parent or guardian. The U.S. Department of Education (2002) asserted that traditional college students were categorized as those who attended college full-time after receiving a high school diploma, were supported financially by a parent, and have a part-time job or no job during the academic school year.

**Statement of the Problem**

Undergraduate minority adult learners are continuing to enter higher education. Yet, there are a number of adult learners who leave without a degree. Much research has been dedicated to the retention of traditional students. Yet, limited research has been conducted on undergraduate minority adult learners in higher education. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) stated, even with the shift in higher education, adult students are not recognized for their contribution to this shift, which is demonstrated in the lack of research available on the topic of adult learners. This lack of research led some to believe that some institutions were neglecting the needs of their adult
The motivation of an adult learner differs based on his or her experiences, educational background, ability, and overall attitude toward learning (Chao, 2009). In the 2015-2016 academic school year, the Centrism College-Central Florida campus in which this study took place had 1,061 enrolled adult learners including those who took both on-campus and online courses (Internal WebFOCUS Report, 2016). Among that population, 206 students (19%) experienced academic difficulty. The majority of the population was representative of a minority group either by race or gender. Of the 206 students who experienced academic difficulty in 2015, 78% were females, and 75% were minority females. It was also reported that 83% of the total population identified as African-American, 7% Hispanic, 4% White, 2% Asian, less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3% Unknown (Internal WebFOCUS Report 2016). The college’s academic policy and procedures states:

A student was placed on academic probation following the session when their GPA fell below satisfactory progress of 2.0. A student on probation was unable to hold any appointed or elective offices in student government and must comply with required conditions by the academic progress committee. After two sessions of academic difficulty, a student was suspended for two sessions and would have to write a letter to the Vice President to be reinstated. Lastly, if a student was reinstated through the readmissions process and did not make satisfactory progression the student was dismissed for three years and would not be readmitted until the dismissal period ended. (Centrism College, 2014)

Other than the probation, suspension, and dismissal policy, there were few retention measures set in place by the college to assist the adult learners who found themselves in the lower 19% population (Internal communication, section enrollment summary, August 3, 2016). The
college’s catalog did mention the availability of academic advisement. However, it was not deemed mandatory for adult learners to seek advising and advisors were not notified of a student’s progression until a decision had been made regarding their academic status. Advisors were not sent alerts regarding student attendance until a student had missed two weeks of class. Advisors did not receive correspondence from instructors regarding student performance nor were advisors alerted if students registered for the wrong courses. As a result, advisors at Centrism College-Central Florida may not have been actively engaged with students unless the student was actively seeking help or the student had already been suspended or dismissed from the college.

Are institutions implementing services that would positively affect the overall motivation of their minority adult learner population? Processes were often implemented with little regard to how they would affect the students. Campbell (2005) noted that adult learners, especially those from low-economic backgrounds, were often minority and female, which could have limited their ability to complete their degrees. Brown (2004) suggested that institutions could provide programs with practical content, supportive environments, set practical expectations, and establish a greater sense of social integration. Campbell (2005) added that, in a 2002 focus group, adult learners listed family responsibilities, being a single parent, being a sole caretaker, and the need for daycare among the challenges they faced. Colleges, universities, and government agencies have invested a vast number of resources into the development and implementation of retention programs. Although some institutions have improved their retention efforts, there are still those that have not (Carey 2005b; Carey & Hess, 2009, as cited in Tinto, 2012).
The problem in this study was lack of research about the growing population of students who were experiencing academic difficulty and the limited resources to help retain them. Although the institution continued to purchase marketing ads to attract more students, there were few measures in place to retain them if, in fact, the new students ended up among the failing 19%. This study sought to identify those factors that affected minority adult learners and recommend preventative measures that could have assisted in retaining them early on.

The Centrism College-Central Florida campus had the highest number of suspensions and probations among the 36 extended campus locations. This created a retention problem for the institution at-large. With 19% of the student population at this campus either on probation, suspended, or dismissed, campus leaders needed to reevaluate why students were failing and what could be done to improve their prospects. The students here needed some more “skin in the game” (D. Hillside, personal communication August 2016). Hillside, director of the Central Florida campus, made the comment of “skin in the game” in reference to the increased number of students failing courses. His concern was that students were not taking enough pride in themselves or finding value in their education here at the college. To him, the phrase “skin in the game” meant students were eager to learn, took pride in their education, and believed a college education was extremely important.

A qualitative study was needed to explore in more depth what caused a student to experience academic difficulty, and what preventative strategies could be developed and implemented through the academic advising services. Several quantitative studies have suggested best practices. Yet, there were very few qualitative studies that told the stories of the minority adult learners who found themselves in the academic dismissal pipeline.
Research Questions

1. What factors do students perceive have contributed to their poor academic performance as undergraduate minority adult learners?

2. What past educational experiences do undergraduate minority adult learners believe have affected their ability to adapt to college as adults?

3. What psychological needs are most important to undergraduate minority adult learners who experience academic difficulty?

Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2011) stated there are three essential parts to the conceptual framework: personal interest, topical research, and conceptual framework. Personal interests helped to explore one’s own ideologies and theories behind why something was or was not happening. Topical research focused on the subject itself that could provide possible support for the significance of the study. In addition, the conceptual framework was usually framed by the literature (Ravitch & Riggan, 2011).

The field of higher education has been influenced by several different disciplines. This study employed the conceptual frameworks of psychology, andragogy, and retention. Tinto’s (2012) retention model was one of the foundational theories used in this study. Other studies expounding on Tinto’s work were used to incorporate the influence of cultural diversity. The main theory used was the conceptual model designed by Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003). As a doctoral student at George Washington University, Watson Swail developed the geometric model of student persistence and achievement to provide a retention lens in which students and the institution could both have mutual and individual goals (Swail, 1995). Together, Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) continued to address retention issues in higher education; later, referring to the
retention framework simply as the geometric model. The geometric model places students at the heart of a triangle to address internal and external influences that affect student persistence. These were known as cognitive, social, and institutional factors (Swail et al., 2003). Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) focused on student values, congruence, retention, and academic fit. The academic fit determined whether the institution aligned with the satisfaction of the student. Institutional responsibility was a major concern that could have caused students not to be as successful. This was referred to as academic fit. Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) claimed that when the fit was not suitable for the student, discourse and dissatisfaction were more likely. The lack of institutional support provided a greater risk of having a student leave (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). Identifying academic fit shed light on motivation and specifically the lack of student support or advising among adult learners. This study used Swail et al. (2003) as the main conceptual framework for gathering the students’ perspectives on how cognitive, social, and institutional factors influenced their abilities. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was used as a secondary conceptual framework to address students’ psychological needs, personal goals, aspirations, and internal needs.

**Assumptions**

This study was conducted at a campus comprised mostly of female undergraduate minority adult learners. It was assumed that most of the participants in this study would be female and from a racial group. It was assumed that the undergraduate minority adult learners who did well and who were retained were intrinsically motivated. To that extent, those who were intrinsically motivated usually were satisfied with their educational experience and found Centrism College to be an academic fit. It was further assumed that some adult students who were successful and demonstrated high satisfaction had a good rapport with a faculty or staff
member, or academic advisor at the college. Last, it was inferred that academic advisors assisted in some way with the retention of undergraduate minority adult learners. Drake (2011) stated students who were academically successful established a relationship with faculty, staff, or an academic advisor.

**Limitations**

The study was limited to undergraduate minority adult learners who experienced academic difficulty at Centrism College-Central Florida campus, where the student population was primarily minority. Another limitation was that the dynamics of each of the campuses were different regarding staff population, resources, and community involvement, which may also impose an element of limitation. The diversity of the student population may not have been representative of the other 35 extended campuses of Centrism College. The disclosure of the responses to the interview questions and the questionnaire were at the discretion of the participants. The data used to develop this study were based on the participants’ perceptions of their obstacles, motivations, and experiences.

Criterion sampling was most suitable for this study because the participants were gathered from the internal probation, suspension, and dismissal reports campus staff received. Campus administration and academic advisors made suggestions on who they believed would enrich the study; however, they were not informed on who was selected. Since the study used criteria based on poor academic performance, there were likely potential participants who were reluctant to participate in the study.

**Scope of the Study**

The parameters of the study included the connection between motivation, retention, and academic advising for undergraduate minority adult learners at a mid-sized private college,
which was referred to as Centrism College. The selected student population was limited to undergraduate minority adult learners who attended Centrism College’s Central Florida campus. Students attending this campus may have taken both on-campus as well as online courses interchangeably. Regardless of academic level, each student at this location has been assigned an academic advisor from registration to graduation using the self-contained advising model. The student population included those who have been on probation, were suspended, or dismissed. Also, the student population included current and past military professionals, those who were employed, unemployed, and those with prior college experience.

**Rationale**

This study applied the Swail et al. geometric model (2003) to undergraduate minority adult learners to gather their experiences both academically and personally. This study also considered how the three factors (i.e., cognitive, social, and institutional) could lead to a lack of motivation, poor academic performance, and lack of retention. Recommendations for a retention program in which academic advisors had an active role in the retention process was desired to help retain students who could face academic difficulty. The researcher did not assume that all of the students had a good experience when returning to college after being placed on probation, suspension, or dismissed. When returning from suspension and dismissal, all students were encouraged by the college to meet with an advisor. However, not all of them did. To minimize the impact of academic difficulty among undergraduate minority adult learners as Shields (2012) affirmed, their deficit thinking must be rejected and reconstructed to promote student success. Wolfson, Cavanagh, and Kraiger, (2014) argued that age-related changes in cognition could influence older adults. The authors further argued that motivation has the ability to change with age. Therefore, these changes should be considered when designing instruction for adult learners.
Since the motivation and satisfaction of undergraduate minority adult learners can differ based on their background and past educational experiences, it was important to have a basic understanding of what the general influences were of this population. In addition to creating a learning environment that promoted academic fit for adult learners, Kenner and Wienerman (2011) believed adult learners have some form of success in their non-academic lives that could be replicated in their academic accomplishments. The authors continued to affirm that undergraduate minority adult learners learned better when they understood the benefits of new strategies that could help them reach their goal, rather than when the new strategies were viewed as a useless “introductory hoop” (Kenner & Wienerman, 2011, p. 94). That finding suggests it was important for undergraduate minority adult learners to be actively engaged in the learning process. By doing so, the researcher could identify the support needed for them to be successful in reaching their goals.

Significance

This study was significant because it contributed to the gap in research that linked undergraduate minority adult learners, academic difficulty, and minority retention. The study also assisted Centrism College leaders in understanding the relationship between adult learner motivation, academic difficulty, and retention. Wilson (2005) agreed that some literature supports that a student’s institutional experience could affect his or her retention and degree completion. By identifying students’ experiences with an academic advisor, the college would be able to prepare the advisors better in their role in the retention process. From the responses from the participants, the college received feedback on how satisfied the students were with the quality of learning while shedding light on the motivational factors that influenced their success.
Hermanaowicz (2006) stated that the plan was not for students to enroll and to be admitted into college only for the students to leave without a degree. Therefore, it was important to address the reasons why undergraduate minority adult learners were not completing their degrees while also identifying those successful practices for this niche group. According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), when adult learners entered higher education they were likely to have had a gap in their academic progression. The gap between the time they received their high school diploma, GED, or last attended college could be extremely significant when trying to adjust to a collegiate environment.

**Definition of Terms**

The following key terms were used in this study:

- **Academic difficulty**—is experienced when a student is placed on probation, suspension, or dismissal. Tinto (2012) stated academic difficulty (therefore, academic dismissal) typically reflects a situation in which the demands of the academic system prove too great. This results in academic boredom, voluntary withdrawal, or poor academic performance.

- **Adult learner**—according to Jacot, Frenay, and Cazan (2010), adult learners were considered individuals 25 years old or older, who had their education interrupted for a year or more. The authors also stated that adult learners could be married, have families, and professional responsibilities.

- **Andragogy**—Lee and Pang (2014) stated Knowles’ theory of andragogy was designed to address the specific needs of adults. Andragogy emphasized adults as self-directed and responsible learners.
• *Minority*—are students among the underrepresented population and account for a small percentage of the population (Swail, 1995). This study included women of various races and various minorities as the underrepresented minority group of Centrism College.

• *Motivation*—motivation has been defined as a state of mind that arouses activities of human body action. People with intrinsic motivation in learning have been thought to be self-driven to accomplish their personal satisfaction. In contrast, extrinsically motivated people have been thought to engage in learning to achieve specific incentives or rewards (Hassan, Cheung, Imran, Muhammad, & Kashif, 2010 as cited in Lee & Pang, 2014). Motivation has been deemed to be an internal behavior that gives one direction and purpose (Huitt, 2011), and helps to fuel decisions, ambitions, and goals.

• *Persister*—A student who continues to enroll in college (Swail, 1995). For this study, this included those with unusual enrollment patterns, which meant their enrollment could have been sporadic.

• *Retention*—occurs when an institution does not offer support or there is a lack of peer mentorship available to assist students with degree completion (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013).

**Conclusion**

As more adults have entered higher education, it is important to create an environment where adults felt valued, where they felt safe, and where they could learn. It was equally important for advisors to receive appropriate training on how to deal with adult learners academically. Colleges and universities alike that specialize in educating adults need to consider providing better student support to improve the overall academic performance, motivation, and retention of the adult student population.
Chapter One highlighted the background, purpose, conceptual framework, assumptions, research questions, and significance to support this study and the importance of focusing on the adult learner population. Chapter Two will embark on the literature review to further explore literature surrounding the topic and identify gaps. The literature review addresses the cognitive, social, and institutional factors related to the retention of undergraduate minority adult learners. Additional chapters include Chapter Three, Methodology; Chapter Four, Results; and Chapter Five, Conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Interwoven into the fabric of this literature review were the underpinnings of psychological theory. Understanding the intricate mind-body interaction has plagued psychologists for years. René Descartes introduced the modern notions that were mind, body, and spirit. The doctrine of his ideas was that mind could influence one to act; impressions would influence the spirit that would result in physical movement of the body (Schultz & Schultz, 2012). He further explained that the mind produced ideas that were created by external stimulation. Whereas, innate ideas were developed from the mind; he mentioned these were profoundly God, self, perfection, and infinity. The trinity of God is the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit as mentioned in Genesis 1:26 in the Bible. Likewise, the three aspects of human nature are essential to who a person is, how he or she will respond to a situation, and what the person needs to be successful in life.

Life experiences often help to shape how a person views himself or herself and the environment in which one resides. When working with and educating adult learners, it was important to note that their educational attainment could be influenced by many factors. The life experiences and influential factors could be “disturbances,” which could create disequilibrium that could lead to growth (Wheatley, 2006 p. 13). The literature in this study explored the trinity of minority retention through the use of the Swail et al.’s (2003) geometric model and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1956).

Swail et al.’s (2003) geometric model discusses the correlation between the cognitive, social, and institutional factors of the student’s experiences (Swail et al., 2003). The authors stated that equilibrium was the mode or supportive space the student was in while persisting in
college. Therefore, when equilibrium was not present the student was at risk of stopping or dropping out.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

To assist with the interconnectedness of human nature and minority retention, this study used Abraham Maslow, the “spiritual father” of humanistic psychology (Schultz & Schultz, 2012, p. 339) and his five needs to possibly identify in-depth cognitive, social, or institutional factors that often go unaddressed among undergraduate minority adult learners. Prescott and Simpson (2004) conducted a study using Maslow’s needs to frame their interviews of students with poor attendance and persistent absenteeism. Prescott and Simpson (2004) used Maslow and Hertzberg to identify what caused a student to be dissatisfied. The authors proposed that the learning environment must be fulfilling before a student could achieve success in the higher order needs. Failure to address the basic need to be successful results in a lack of motivation, increased withdrawal, and retention issues.

**Physiological Needs**

Equivalent to the basic needs of living were the basics needed for a student to be successful while in pursuit of a college degree. These needs may include supplies, resources, books, Internet access, computer access, and access to course materials. Milheim (2012) asserted that essential elements and tools need to be available at the first level of the hierarchy, included the physicality of the learning environment, “Without these basic resources, students would not be able to achieve higher levels of satisfaction in Maslow’s hierarchy” (p. 161). Students who lacked the basic needs often lagged behind and found it difficult to stay on track with students who were better prepared. The institution played a major role in the preparedness of its students. Advisors, staff, and instructors should attempt to contact the students prior to the start of a course
to assure they had the resources needed (Milheim, 2012). Adult learners were often more vulnerable because of their lack of preparation and complex personal lives, therefore, providing resources was essential (Deggs, 2011). Once the physiological needs were met, then a student could address other areas of the hierarchy.

**Safety and Security**

Security and safety needs were referred to by Prescott and Simpson as hygiene factors (2004). Factors affecting absenteeism were often associated with dissatisfaction, which caused a student to withdraw. Through the use of interviews, the authors discovered that locating information pertaining to classes was a challenge that was overwhelming and frustrating for the students (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). This included information placed on bulletin boards in which new and old information were cluttered together and made it difficult to find new postings (i.e., classroom changes and attending class or tutoring sessions at the wrong time because of poor information). When a new student entered unfamiliar territory, these challenges and frustrations may cause unwanted anxiety. To some people, this may not seem important, but Milheim (2012) listed safety needs to include order and comfortability. Being uncomfortable could result in the student being uncertain, apprehensive, or uneasy with the environment.

**Belonging and Love Needs**

The next tier of Maslow’s theory was belonging and love needs, referred to as social and academic inclusion (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). The idea of belonging was demonstrated by the inclusion to the classroom environment, the participation in activities or clubs, or even finding new friends. The student-instructor relationship could affect the way the student perceived his or her academic experience. As Milheim (2012, as cited in Sadera, Robertson, Song, & Midon, 2009) stated, the perceived lack of community among the students in the learning environment
could ultimately make the student withdraw from the learning experience altogether. Sadera et al. (2009) added that community had four key components: “membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection” (p. 277).

**Esteem Needs**

The foundation of this level was respect, validation, and reassurance. One way this was demonstrated was by treating each student as an individual. In the student-instructor relationship, the instructor was obliged to respect that he or she would have a unique relationship with each student. The instructor should be mindful that no two students would have the same needs or would have the same experiences (O’Toole & Essex, 2012). For those adult learners who found themselves struggling in the classroom, an instructor may use encouraging strategies or other forms of reinforcement (Milheim, 2012). Skinner’s behaviorism and reinforcement theory was frequently referenced by Milheim (2002) when attempting to improve behaviors and stimulate motivation. Manzoor, Ahmed, and Gill (2015) believed that Skinner’s theory was ideal when fostering student esteem needs since Skinner used positive reinforcement along with simplifying tasks. In addition, the authors mentioned that continual repetition, starting simple, gradually advancing to more complex tasks, and providing constructive criticism would motivate the student, improve classroom performance, and build one’s esteem (Manzoor, Ahmed, & Gill, 2015). The last need presented in the hierarchical structure was the level of self-actualization.

**Self-actualization**

At the last stage of the hierarchy of needs was the ability for the student to experience the feeling of accomplishment, reached goals, or conquered fears. The student-instructor relationship played a major role in how a student perceived himself or herself and the abilities to accomplish goals. Schultz and Schultz (2012) used the analogy of a mother-child relationship of positive
regard where the child learned from the mother’s reaction those behaviors that were favorable and those that were unfavorable. Milheim (2012) suggested that instructors could create assignments that appealed to the student’s abilities. There was no specific way to know what environments would work best for students at this level; however, the added encouragement would not hurt. Schultz and Schultz (2012) included the perspective from Carl Rogers, known for his work in psychotherapy. The authors stated that Rogers believed that self-actualizing meant having a healthy psychological state. A few of these qualities were, “sense of freedom, a high degree of creativity, tendency to live fully in every moment, and the continual need to maximize their potential” (Schultz & Schultz, 2012, p. 345). Prescott and Simpson (2004) found that the lack of individual attention in large settings can lead to poor academic progression along with exclusion from peers and the denial of their insufficiencies proved to have a negative effect on the student’s outcome and ability to persist in college.

The hierarchy of needs was a foundational perspective of how to identify what adult learners need to be successful in the classroom. Adult learners have often found themselves among two worlds where they needed to learn how to balance life to stay the course. Often, adult learners have needed to learn how to merge their complex personal lives’ where they were seemingly in control, into a world of which many had little knowledge. For some adult learners, college in itself was viewed as a new world that had the tendency to cause fear and doubt, “[Adult] students live in multiple realities and lead cyclical lives that demand a high degree of biculturalism” (Rendón, 1996, p. 19, as cited in Swail et al., 2003).

The institutional culture of higher education is comprised of various majors, degrees, and programs. Yet, one concern that academia has sought to address has been how to retain its most valuable asset; human capital, also known as its students. The large increase of adult learners in
higher education has been, to some degree, a result of company cutbacks, layoffs, and outsourcing. Consequently, adults have decided to choose the stable environment of higher education (Tracey, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education reported:

the percentage increase in the number of students age 25 and over who enrolled in degree-granting institutions has been similar to the percentage increase in the number of younger students, but the rate of increase was expected to be higher for students age 25 and over in the coming years. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015)

As institutions continue to expand, one key component was understanding why students leave, drop out, or even flunk out of school. This was even more important for institutions that were attempting to increase their adult learner population. Freire (2007) wrote, “people are fulfilled only to the extent that they can create their world” (p. 145). Adult learners have enrolled in college for many different reasons and at different points in their careers. Yet, they often face similar logistical, academic, and financial obstacles when trying to achieve access and success in higher education (Markowitz & Russell, 2006). Felder and Brent (2005) suggested that no two students were the same and their ability to comprehend what was being taught was governed by their motivation, attitudes toward teaching and learning, along with prior preparation. Deggs (2011) suggests that adult learners are often more vulnerable because of their lack of academic preparation in higher education. This placed greater emphasis on the need to offer support to adult learners’ social and academic interactions (Swail, 2003). Madgett and Belanger (2008) used Tinto’s (1993) and Swail et al.’s (2003) model to address institutional departure among first-year students with several determinants, which would cause a student to leave the institution. The determinants that Madgett and Belanger (2008) listed were economic factors, transferring to another institution, academic difficulties, personal responsibilities, personal
issues, problems with residential life, poor academic performance, and poor advising or teaching (Aitken, 1982; Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998; Scales, 1960, as cited in Madgett & Belanger 2008). Research has shown that family and peers have contributed to the academic failure of students (Schneider & Coleman 1993; Steinberg et al. 1996 as cited in Needham, Crosnoe, & Muller, 2004). Brill (2013) suggested that institutions were not giving adult students the support needed to be successful. Swail et al.’s (2003) geometric model of student persistence and achievement placed the student’s experience at the heart of an equilateral triangle identifying the three sides as cognitive factors, social factors, and institutional factors. In the context of student retention, motivation played a major role in all three of these areas of the student’s experience. The next portion of the literature in this chapter addressed the historical aspects of adult learner education and Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement.

**Adult Learner Education**

Adult education is not a new concept, and many people have taught adults for years based on the assumption that there was a better way to teach adults (Knowles, 1973). As new technologies continued to emerge, adult education began to receive the respect it deserved far beyond the initial assumptions. The word *andragogy* was derived from the Greek word *aner*, meaning man (Knowles, 1973). The term was first used in 1833 in Germany; in the 1970s, the Department of Pedagogical and Andragogical Sciences was established at the University of Amsterdam.

Knowles (1980) popularized the concept of andragogy in the United States, which he defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn,” contrasting it with pedagogy “the art and science of teaching children” (Teal, 2011, p. 1). Knowles (1973) imparted the need for instructors to understand the importance of appropriately educating adult students. This was
made apparent through studies that showed adults were more independent and more intrinsically motivated to learn as they aged. Huitt (2011) wrote motivation was an internal behavior giving one direction and purpose. No one theory can be applied to all adult learners (Teal, 2011). Holton, Knowles, and Swanson (2005) explained that Knowles’ andragogical model was used to prepare the learner, identify learner needs, establish a conductive learning environment, set goals, and create mutual collaborations. Lee and Pang (2014) added that Knowles’ theory of andragogy was designed to address the specific needs of adults. Andragogy put an emphasis on adults as self-directed and responsible learners. Knowles’ (1973) four initial assumptions for the andragogical model were (a) changes in self-concept, (b) role of experience, (c) readiness to learn, and (d) orientation to learning. These four assumptions helped to distinguish between pedagogy and andragogy. Knowles (1989) later added two additional assumptions: the need to know and motivation.

Babineau and Packard (2006) conducted a study of 70 nontraditional-aged college students to survey their experiences related to career and educational pathways. The perspective of the study conducted by Babineau and Packard (2006) centered on the developmental and psychological views of adult education highlighting why some people finish college following high school and why some choose to wait until later to go to college. The participants were able to identify with “one possible self” based on their experience as an adolescent. The two types of the “possible self” as Babineau and Packard (2006) stated, was the “self” that did not attend college and the “self” that did attend college but did not finish. The authors concluded that those who had prior college experiences rejected or reclaimed their past self as a way to reconcile with themselves while those who did not have prior college experiences were more likely to create a new self. Among the two groups were commonalities that hindered them from attending or
completing college, which were financial aid restraints and the lack of family support. Babineau and Packard (2006) helped to justify the need for more exploration on how the past experiences of adult learners have affected their perception of education. Gladieux and Swail (2000) wrote:

> the roots of unequal educational opportunity were deep, and higher education alone could not redress the social imbalances that appeared to threaten our country’s future. All of us must accept the challenge to try to make a difference. (p. 688)

Albert Einstein once said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them” (as cited in Sutrisno, MacYoung, & Gordon, 2004, p. 212). The statement holds to the truth that within higher education there is still a need for stakeholders and administrators to demonstrate moral courage and deficit thinking to improve retention and student success. Although many colleges and universities have increased their acknowledgment of adult students, not all have adapted to andragogy theory. The adult learner population needs to have an inclusive learning environment that could foster their unique educational needs. Shields (2010) stated that leaders should act with courage and conviction to bring about the collective promise of education. Although education in the United States has evolved since Brown vs. Board of Education, minorities are still faced with unequal opportunities that make it more difficult for them to fulfill their educational dreams. For those students categorized as both minority and an adult learner, has further complicated the educational inequalities they may face. Educational inequalities also were found to affect those students labeled with a disability. Research has shown that disabled students were often seen as unimportant (Kiln & Hudak, 2014). Swail et al. (2003) reported that educational attainment among minorities was considerably substandard in comparison to their white and Asian counterparts. In addition, low-income individuals and those with disabilities were also at a disadvantage. This was particularly
true in states such as California, Texas, and Florida that have been known to have a “majority minority” population; these specific states demonstrated lower enrollment rates of minorities in higher education (Swail et al., 2003, p. 2).

Research has shown that when minority students entered higher education, they were often underprepared. Haycock (2001) claimed that the lack of preparedness could have been attributed to students attending schools in high poverty areas that lacked educational and financial benefits. She also believed that culturally incompetent teachers were contributing factors affecting underprepared students. Haycock (2001) continued by adding that many high school minority students in the late 1990s did not have basic reading skills. She reported that one in 50 Latinos and one in 100 Black high school students were unable to read and comprehend information presented. If the majority of those same students who were not able to read decided to attend college as an adult learner, their lack of preparation could directly affect their ability to comprehend at the collegiate level. Swail et al. (2003) found that nearly 40% of all new first-year college students could not read or write at grade level. In addition, virtually 44% of college students have taken at least one preparatory or developmental learning course in the areas of math, writing, or reading. Swail et al. (2003) found that in the year 2000 at the turn of the century, Hispanics and black adults aged 25 and older combined accounted for only 28% of the population with baccalaureate degrees compared to a combined total of whites and Asian with 72%.

**Geometric Model and Hierarchy of Needs**

Over the years, the concepts surrounding student retention have evolved while providing much detail regarding what minority students may face when attending predominately white institutions, but many of the models have failed to explain the institution’s role in the student’s
experience. Swail et al.’s (2003) geometric model was the conceptual framework that merged the student’s experience and institutional policy. The Swail et al. geometric model viewed the student experience from three equal perspectives that contributed to the balance of the student’s academic life. Although this model has often been used when referencing traditional students, undergraduate minority adult learners could also benefit from the model as well. The Swail et al. (2003) geometric model has been designed to focus on the wholeness of the student’s life and not merely on isolated variables. Although equilibrium is ideal for all three areas of the model, that is not representative of human nature or societal normalcy.

The geometric model viewed student success using cognitive, social, and institutional factors. Swail, Mullen, Gardner, and Reed (2008) assumed that students entered college with their own cognitive and social strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses affected the student’s worldview that ultimately determined how successful the student would be at the institution:

the model [was] only helpful if the components could be operationalized . . . unless the institution made a true effort to understand, in real terms, who their students were with regard to cognitive and social skill sets, the institution could hardly comprehend what it was they must do to help students succeed. This was a tremendously important point: institutions need to know about their students—on an individual basis—if they want to truly provide the necessary resources to support their educational and future success. Anything else was simply tinkering at the margins and not taking student retention seriously. (Swail, Mullen, Gardner, & Reed, 2008, p. 17)

The authors continued by stating the cognitive factors equated to issues that the student may face in his or her academic world (Swail, Mullen, Gardner, & Reed, 2008).
For minority adult learners, this could have meant their past educational experiences, skills, and their technological aptitude. The social factors were identified as the emotional, cultural traits, and family history, which Swail et al. (2008) stated “greatly define[s] who the student is, in partnership with the cognitive skill sets, presenting the “whole” student to the institution” (p. 17). Kesebir, Graham, and Oishi (2010) believed that one regularly found his or her purpose in life based on his or her associations with others. They have also been known to find their purpose based on their cultural ties to the arts, religious practices, and scholarship. One’s cultural ties extend far beyond one’s community (Kesebir, Graham, & Oishi, 2010). These cultural traits help to establish the person. The institutional factors consisted of those areas that fostered success while at the institution, which include financial aid, student services, recruitment/admissions, academic services, and curriculum/instruction (Swail et al., 2003).

There were four distinctive ways to understand whether the student was experiencing balance or if the student favored one factor more than the others using Swail et al.’s geometric model. The student’s stability was measured by the geometric model as (a) the perfect polygon in which all three sides are equal, (b) socially strong/cognitively weak, (c) cognitively strong/socially weak, or (d) socially/cognitively strong.

The perfect polygon was described as an equilibrium state where both the cognitive and social factors are fully supported by the institution. The socially strong/academically (cognitive) weak triangle represents a student who may not be strong in the classroom but socially affluent (Swail, 2004, p. 18). Even though the student might not be academically strong, the institution would still need to meet his or her social needs for him or her to experience equilibrium within himself or herself. A student who was cognitively strong/socially weak could have experienced success academically but lack social skills or sense of belonging. The institution would need to
socially integrate the student into the college culture. Last, socially/cognitively strong was an isosceles triangle where the institution merely needed to exist. Since the student was strong academically and socially, there was a good chance that the student would remain at the institution. In the event that something traumatic occurred between the student and the institution (e.g., loss of accreditation and program cancellation), that would ultimately deter the student from persisting (Swail et al., 2003, p. 83; see Appendix G).

In each of the geometric model variations of stability, the institution was the constant or the dependent variable. Alternatively, the independent variables were social and cognitive factors because these could change because of both internal and external factors, “A student with low net cognitive resources and low net social resources was [viewed as an] unlikely [student] to persist in college, regardless of what the institution may provide in terms of support services” (Swail et al., 2003, p. 84).

Swail et al. (2003) viewed the geometric model as a way to understand what factors affect persistence among students and the involvement the institution has, “Only through the collection of data to further understand the cognitive and social experiences of students can the institution know how to act on these conceptual structures” (Swail et al., 2003, p. 80). With additional research and the acknowledgment of difficulties that undergraduate minority adult learners might face when trying to persist in college, institutions can move to action and start implementing retention mechanisms. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2012) suggested using additional lenses for a robust perspective on adult learning. Therefore, to conceptualize the emergence of Swail et al.’s geometric model and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as related to minority adult learner retention, Figure 1 was drawn to depict similarities.
Figure 1. Emergence of Swail et al.’s geometric model and Maslow’s (1956) hierarchy of needs.

To further understand a student’s equilibrium, the inclusion of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was incorporated. Maslow’s (1956) hierarchy of needs was grounded in humanism where he believed that a person must fulfill basic needs before more complex needs could be satisfied. The five needs were (a) physiological needs, (b) safety needs, (c) belonging and love needs, (d) esteem needs and, (e) self-actualization. Each of the levels in Maslow’s hierarchical structure was the building blocks that led a person closer to the goal of self-actualization. Maslow was concerned with the idea of experiencing wholeness and used this hierarchy as the base for his motivational theory (Goebel & Brown, 1981). Maslow (1970) studied the works of several individuals who he thought to be good examples of self-actualizers (e.g., Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, George Washington Carver, and Max Wertheimer; Schultz & Schultz, 2012). To reach self-actualization, Schultz and Schultz, (2012) listed several characteristics based on Maslow’s theory of self-actualized individuals:
• an objective perception of reality;
• a full acceptance of their own nature;
• a commitment and dedication to some kind of work;
• simplicity and naturalness of behavior;
• a need for autonomy, privacy, and independence;
• intense mystical or peak experiences;
• empathy with and affection for all humanity;
• resistance to conformity;
• a democratic character structure;
• an attitude of creativeness and;

Gold (2005) asserted, “adult learners have unique social, physical, and cognitive characteristics that have an impact on learning” (p. 468). When applying Maslow’s theory to the factors that affected the minority adult learner experience, it was apparent that basic needs were important to achieve at the cognitive, social, and institutional levels for the student to experience success and be retained. However, Maslow (1970), himself, criticized the thought of self-actualization and later restated, “self-actualization was the actual realizing of self, and no two are alike” (Maslow, 1956). Rowan (1999) criticized Maslow (1970) and argued that a person could reach self-actualization at levels of belonging, love, and esteem needs. The author concluded that the pyramid should be divided into deficiency motivation and abundance motivation. He proposed that people have a choice to decide from which motivation they would like to focus, whether it was their lower level needs or higher needs. This supported Swail et al.’s geometric
model’s variations of stability because undergraduate minority adult learners may have varied backgrounds, occupations, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills along with academic experiences, which could have caused the shift in their stability at the institution. Tinto (1975) emphasized that the student’s changing commitments to the “need” of college completion could be met prematurely to appease other aspects of his or her life including friendships, personal or financial satisfaction, and time.

Many of the underlying theories used to develop the geometric model were attributed to the field of psychology, which solidified the connection between the use of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail et al.’s geometric model. Within the geometric model, Swail et al. (2003) identified three distinctive factors (i.e., cognitive, social, and institutional) that link the student’s experience internally and externally. Referring to Figure 1, Swail et al. (2003) listed several sub-contributors that affect the student’s experience; these were listed on the outside of the pyramid while Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was listed inside the pyramid. Figure 1 illustrated the internal linkage of human well-being displayed with Maslow’s needs inside the pyramid or inside the student while the geometric model listed the external factors a student needs for educational attainment.

The separation of psychology and the factors associated with the geometric model were too complex to overlook. Therefore, Maslow’s needs theory was used to conceptualize the connection. Barsalou (2014) suggested that cognitive psychology was best described as a “computer” that “retrieves information from memory, transforms information in memory and send information back into the environment” (p. 9). Cognitive psychology internally processes the unconscious behaviors and activities in the brain (Barsalou, 2014). With respect to adult learners, they preferred to build on the information they already had rather than learning
something new (Kenner & Wienerman, 2011). Many adult learners enter college with certain life experiences that have shaped their views, prejudices, and fears. Swail et al. (2003) included academic rigor, learning skills, time management, technology ability, content knowledge, and quality of learning as influences on cognitive factors. Opposite the cognitive factors, Swail et al. (2003) listed social factors that were believed to affect a student’s persistence. These included but were not limited to financial issues, education legacy, maturity, communication skills, goal commitment, social lifestyle, cultural values, and religious background. Social psychology has elected to focus on the important social behaviors of an individual, which was inclusive of both physical and social surroundings that influence the person’s behavior (Shaver, 2015, p. 17). The last constructs of the geometric model were the institutional factors. Zittoun (2008) stated:

> thinking space represents the person in interaction with others . . . the frame in which these interactions take place . . . out of institutions, traditions, cultures, all shaping . . . interactions, roles, identities, knowledge process taking place within. (p. 168)

Swail et al. (2003) listed financial aid, student services, recruitment, admissions, academic services, curriculum, and instruction as institutional factors:

> Wise educational leaders have learned to create psychological spaces for genuine exploration of differences; they have initiated conversations where problems and challenges may be identified and discussed, and they have created a climate in which staff and students feel safe in clarifying their assumptions to deal with cultural dissonance. (as cited in Brown, 2004)

This literature review continued with an in-depth view of the individual factors that affect minority adult learner retention using the geometric model as the major lens and the hierarchy of
needs as the supplemental lens. Undergraduate minority adult learners might experience the barriers of:

(a) low self-concept; threatened by the classroom . . . (b) time, energy, and emotional demands, (c) establishing financial stability, (d) work and civic demands, (e) developing family relationships and caring for family, (f) questioning career choices, and (g) reappraised habits and interests. (Deggs, 2011, as cited in Terrell, 1990, p. 1543)

These barriers were interconnected to both Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail et al.’s geometric model, which provided a multilateral perspective of the minority adult learner experience.

**Factors of the Geometric Model**

In a perfect world, it would be the ideal of all undergraduate minority adult learners to continue to persist without any academic difficulty; unfortunately, that is not always the case. Adult learners enter college for many different reasons. Additionally, the factors that affect their ability to persist could also differ. Woosley (2003) conducted a study using Tinto’s (1993) theory of goal commitment related to stop-outs versus dropouts. Tinto (1993) inferred that if students lacked commitment, they were more likely to leave the institution once difficulty appeared.

Woosley’s (2003) research indicated that students who decided to attend another institution had too many required courses, had conflicts with their jobs, felt alone or isolated, or were unhappy with the college policies and procedures were among several of the reasons why students decided not to reenroll at their initial institution. Woosley (2003) continued by reporting that students who were more involved culturally and interacted with instructors were more likely to continue instead of withdrawing.
Cognitive Factors

Swail et al. (2003) viewed cognitive factors as the ability for the student to demonstrate completion of his or her academic degree, which stems from their motivation. Adults usually decide to pursue their college education in response to personal or professional life changes. Kenner and Wienerman (2011) believed adult learners have some form of success in their non-academic lives that could be replicated in their academic accomplishments. The authors believed it was important for adult learners to be engaged actively in the learning process so that they could make the connection between what they were being taught and the responsibilities they had in their personal lives.

European scholar Emile Durkheim was noted by many as the founder of modern sociology. His work centered on socialization and social isolation based on the theory of suicide. Tinto (2012) used this ideology as the foundation for his student integration theory (Lunden, 1958). Commonly noted, many of the services provided at institutions have focused more on the traditional student rather than those classified as adult learners. In Durkheim’s theory, he would argue that this would be an example of isolating the adults from his or her rite of passage toward degree completion. Tinto borrowed the idea of the rite of passage from Arnold Van Gennep from the early 20th century who viewed life as occurring in stages (Kember, 1995). Tinto expanded on the rites of passage by looking at the transition of graduating high school students who decided to attend college. The transitional period, as he viewed it, was similar to cultural rites of passage of a child moving on to adulthood within society. Yet, this ideology has not always been applicable when discussing the educational progression of adult learners. O’Toole and Essex (2012) expressed the need to view students as individuals and understand that students learn
differently. The authors continued to state their findings by stating that adults learned better when they saw the value in what they were learning.

Adult learners have been seen as a niche student population that has continued to grow. The U.S. Department of Education reported that the enrollment of traditional and nontraditional students age 25 and older both was projected to increase by 35%. From 2012-2023, NCES projected a rate increase of 20% for nontraditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). With a projected increase of 20%, institutions would need to have measures in place to handle students who suffered from academic difficulty. Not all students who withdrew or left the institution were dropouts, which was often a common misconception. There were some students who experienced academic difficulty who might wish to return to an institution to complete their desired degree.

Social Factors

Social integration has been found to be just as important for adult students as it has been for traditional students. Even in an adult learner environment, adults want to have a sense of belonging. Kambutu and Thompson (2005) stated, “culturally responsive educators make a conscious effort to create learning environments that are empowering to all learners” (p. 7). The academic support of instructors played a major role in how students feel while in the classroom. Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2012) conducted a case study in which they created a transformative learning environment where the students engaged freely in topics related to cultural acceptance and opposing views. The instructor promoted inclusion by valuing the students’ differences and encouraging them to use their voices. At the end of the course, the students had developed a sense of comfort and family despite their cultural views. Robson-Funk, Yopp, McMurtry, Phillips-Miller, and Young (2000) stated that students and instructors in adult education should
understand and develop new social, familial, and professional roles with others while becoming aware of their own prejudices. Kambutu and Thompson (2005) agreed, culturally responsive leaders have the ability to engage students with social justice issues because of their strong understanding of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. For education to foster the needs of undergraduate minority adult learners, equitable and social responsibility must become a priority. Innovative understandings from leadership should be used to prepare students better for the shift needed for educational equality (Brown, 2004). Freire (2007) insisted that educators should speak the language of the people and should not create programs that have little to do with a student’s own doubts, fears, hopes, or preoccupations because the programs could actually increase oppressed consciousness. Knowles (1989) argued that adults were often motivated by growth and development but might encounter barriers that block their abilities. The barriers consisted of negative self-concept, inaccessibility of opportunities, time constraints, and unconducive programming for adults. Childhood experiences can have a lasting impression on the lives of adults, as these experiences reemerge later in life. O’Neill and Thomson (2013) explained that if an adult learner experienced exclusion from their peers, struggles with teachers, school administrators, and/or was labeled as a bad or slow student because of predetermined or undetermined disabilities as a child, these experiences could have adverse effects in their adulthood. The authors further stated that instructors need to recognize the ways that would best educate these types of students so that they too can be successful. Unfortunately, these experiences often make it difficult to adapt to new learning environments.

Belonging in the adult education environment could help to foster better overall academic support. Students who were exposed to diverse environments usually developed coping skills
that were essential in higher education (Swail et al., 2003). Swail et al. (2003) continued their report, asserting that students from less supportive environments had lower esteem.

Vincent Tinto was one of the most renowned names among scholars and practitioners concerned with student retention, first-year learning communities, social integration, and attrition. Tinto has studied trends in student involvement and found that involvement from one year to the next was vital in a student’s decision to return year after year. In his book, “Completing college: Rethinking institutional action,” Tinto (2012) mentioned that social integration consisted of both academic and social involvement while overlapping one another simultaneously. These overlaps included interactions with faculty and engagement in learning activities in which students were more likely to persist than those who experienced loneliness or a lack of involvement.

A comparison study of adult learners who persisted and those who dropped out was conducted by John Swift (1987). He collected data from 148 questionnaires completed by graduates of the adult liberal studies program, which rendered an 88% response rate (Swift, 1987). The comparison of his study was twofold. It identified the characteristics of adults who withdrew in comparison to the characteristics of adults who persisted. To analyze the data, Swift used Tinto’s constructs that could affect the enrollments of adult learners. Swift (1987) was concerned with comparing adult students with satisfactory progression with those who were classified as on probation or suspension. His study revealed that the institutional policy on grade forgiveness was not favorable for native or transfer students but was better suited for the traditional student. At the conclusion of Swift’s (1987) study, intervention programs based on his findings were instituted. However, he also suggested institutions review their policy and how
they handle academic difficulty. Academic advising was part of his recommendation for intervention.

**Institutional Factors**

Institutional factors consist of policies, procedures, and the cultural environment in which learning takes place. Tinto and Pusser (2006) noted that even with all the research on student persistence and attrition, there was no longitudinal model of student success that could be put into practice by institutions striving to enhance retention rates. The institutional factors that the Swail et al. geometric model consisted of included the support the institution offered to the student’s social and academic interactions (Swail, 2003, p. 79).

Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, and Blackwell (1984) used Tinto’s same constructs of individual attributes, past educational experience, goal commitment, institutional commitment, social integration, and academic records. Their study used Tinto’s model of institutional attrition at Washington State University to differentiate withdrawers from persisters. The characteristics of the participants in this study were those who transferred and those who withdrew from the university altogether. In both of the examples using Tinto’s theory, there was a lack of minority response. These quantitative studies focused on similar populations and therefore, may present similar viewpoints. How would the responses differ if the sample populations were predominately minority?

Tierney provided much criticism of Tinto’s conceptual frames. The idea of the rites of passage, as Tierney (1999) explained, took a minority student out of his or her natural environment and forced him or her to appeal to the rites within a foreign society. When minorities were forced to adapt to a culture outside of their norm, Tierney (1999) stated, “[they] undergo rites of passage framed within this ‘foreign’ culture” (Tierney, 1999, p. 82).
Furthermore, under the pretense of Durkheimian’s suicidal theory, Tierney (1999) dispelled the idea that minorities must succumb to cultural suicide to be successful in college. He continued to describe the idea that divorcing oneself from his or her previous cultural relationship or committing figurative suicide of one’s culture to allow assimilation was not always true. Tierney agreed that Tinto’s theories had validity when considering the evaluation of residential or traditional campuses that provided services that created a sense of society and social life for their students. Tierney (1999) explained when minority students from low-income economic environments did not have family members who had gone to college this type of thinking may be helpful. He agreed that retention at socially integrated institutions was higher and provided greater participation opportunities in comparison to part-time and commuter students (Tierney, 1992). Commuter students who were often adult learners lacked social integration into the college culture because not all commuter institutions have been designed to engage students with a social community. Tierney (1999) conducted a research initiative, The Neighborhood Academic Initiative, which encouraged the inclusion of family as part of social integration rather than viewing family as an impediment to the student’s success. Braxton and Hirschy (2011) argued that the underpinning conceptual orientations of economic feasibility, organization’s integrity, psychological support, and social affluence helped to decide a student’s departure (pp. 37-40). As Tinto’s models implied, social integration used similar constructs and proposed that all individuals of ethnicity experienced the cultural idea of the rite of passage. However, Tierney believed that these assumptions were not culturally competent or practical. Credit was given to Tinto (2012) for his foundational work because although he received much criticism, the topic of retention in higher education would be invalid without mention of his work. Swail et al. (2003) used Tinto’s lack of multiculturalism as an opportunity to design a model that could address
minority student retention. Scale (1960) suggested improving counseling and guidance services, better orientation, honor, and tutorial programs. He also mentioned improving financial aid funds, increase grants, and deferred payment programs.

**Conclusion**

The literature revealed several factors that affect the reasons why students would leave the institution lacking degree completion. Based on the literature reviewed, there were gaps identified when trying to determine what specific factors affect minority adult learner retention. Although there were individual studies on adult learners, retention, academic advising, and minority retention; there was still a lack of qualitative research that embodied all four areas. Many other researchers, including Swail et al. (2003), have focused on traditional students, not necessarily adult learners. Furthermore, most of the studies on retention use a quantitative approach to gathering data. The underrepresentation of minorities has plagued retention studies for years. Scales (1960) argued that administrators have not always been cognizant of the retention and withdrawal factors that affect Blacks, especially. For this reason, a qualitative study was needed so that researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders alike would receive feedback from those who were directly affected by retention policies and procedures they put in place. In addition, the student’s perspective on the topic can shed light on the journey of undergraduate minority adult learners who had suffered from academic difficulty. This, too, could identify what measures work best for retaining minority adult students and what needed to be improved. In the next chapter, the researcher discussed the methodology, procedures, description of the site of the student, and the sample population.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter focused on the research design used for the study. The sections covered in
the chapter were methodology, participants, data, analysis, and limitations. Colleges and
universities all over the United States have had policies on retention and what happened when a
student fell below the required grade point average or satisfactory academic standing. Yet,
institutions have rarely heard from those students who have fallen victim to the effects of these
policies. This qualitative study explored the central phenomenon of undergraduate minority adult
learners who were placed on probation, suspension, or dismissed while attending Centrism
College, yet continued to persist. The study sought to understand how possible preventative
measures could have assisted students in retaining them early on. In addition, the study hoped to
identify their experiences and how the findings could assist other undergraduate minority adult
learners who find themselves in similar situations.

Institutional Demographics

At the site in which this study took place, 19% of the student population fell below
academic standards during the 2015-2016 academic school year. A total of 67% (138) were
placed on probation, 15% (31) were on continued academic probation, 10% (21) were
suspended, and 8% (16) were dismissed from Centrism College for three years (Internal
WebFOCUS Reports, 2016). The WebFOCUS report retrieved on August 30, 2016, indicated that
92% of the total population who were on probation, suspension, or dismissal were a minority by
race, 4% were white, and 3% were unknown. Minorities, including all female adult learners,
accounted for 98% of the population. The report alone revealed that females were among 77% of
those who experienced difficulty with retention, with minority women accounting for 74%. The
Central Florida campus had a total of 66 faculty members with 50% being a minority. Based on the WebFOCUS, at the time of the study, the site had enrolled approximately 1,400 students annually.

**Phenomenology**

A phenomenological study was used to document the lived experiences of undergraduate minority adult learners who have been suspended, dismissed, or placed on academic probation. Minority adult learners who attended Centrism College often wore various hats including that of a parent, grandparent, and even employee. By wearing these various hats, it was possible that their responsibilities led minority adult learners to experience greater obstacles when trying to complete their degree. The purpose of the study was to understand the participants’ lived experiences in higher education and to document factors have hindered them from being successful, as well as those factors that motivated them to return. According to Schram (2003, as cited in Merriam, 2009), “Phenomenology [was defined] as a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world, that is, their ‘everyday life and social action’” (p. 25). This study used the phenomenological approach to collect data by examining adult students’ lived experiences framed by the combination of Maslow’s (1956) hierarchy of needs and Swail et al.’s (2003) geometric model. These two conceptual frameworks were based on psychological theories that identify motivational factors that could contribute to one’s success. Furthermore, Swail et al. (2003) and Maslow (1970) both conceptualized what a person needs to be successful, and what type of environment helps to foster their success. This phenomenological study sought to describe the journeys of minority adult students pursuing their bachelor’s degree who experienced academic difficulty along the way. Moustaka (1994) suggested that phenomenological studies focus more on the description of the experience rather than the
interpretation of the researcher (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 80). This researcher hoped that findings might lead to establishing a proactive approach to retention efforts at the local campus.

**Setting**

The setting for this study was at the second largest of 36 nationwide campuses, which were the extensions of a private, mid-sized, Midwest-based college. The extended campuses operate under the direction of an adult education hierarchical structure, which was referred to as the Adult Education Division (AED). Under AED, the extended campuses conducted eight-week sessions that ran concurrent with a 16-week semester. The campus for this study was located in the southeast region of the United States in the Central Florida area. According to an internal enrollment student report, in the 2015-2016 academic school year, the campus had 1,061 students, which included students who took both on-campus and online courses. The report stated that, of those enrolled in the 2015-2016 academic school year, 78% were female and 23% male with an average age of 36 years. Of the adult learners in this population, 83% identified as black or African-American, 8% Hispanic, 4% white, 3% unknown, 2% Asian, and less than 1% identified as American/Alaska Native (internal communication, 2016). Among these students, 19% were on probation, suspension, or dismissal.

**Population**

Undergraduate minority adult learners who had recently graduated or who were currently attending Centrism College-Central Florida campus were the population selected for this study. Specifically, the purposeful sample identified undergraduate minority adult learners who experienced academic difficulty while attending the Centrism College-Central Florida campus; but have continued to persist afterward. Undergraduate minority adult learners who had completed at least 12 credits with Centrism College were highly desired participants.
Participants/Sample

The participants in this study were undergraduate minority adult learners who attended Centrism College-Central Florida campus. These undergraduate minority adult learners were students who had experienced probation, suspension, and/or dismissal while persisting at Centrism College. The participants for this study were selected using internal document reports that identified when the students had been placed on probation, continued on probation, suspension, or dismissal, and those who had been removed from such statuses. Although the researcher had regular access to these reports, approval was needed to utilize the information for the study. The researcher obtained approval from the director of the site used in the study and the senior director of the Department of Student Success. Along with their approval, the researcher also received approval from the Centrism College Protection of Human Subjects Committee (see Appendices H, I, J). The researcher needed additional approval since the reports were not publicized at the time of this study and may have contained sensitive information. The Department of Student Success utilizes the captured data to generate internal reports on retention and student forecasting. The internal reports were useful because they made the desired participants easier to identify. The reports helped to filter those students who had experienced academic difficulty and were reinstated to normal academic status. For example, in the January (2016) session, 86% of the adult students enrolled at the college experienced academic difficulty, and only 14% were reinstated to normal academic status. Understanding that not all students from the reports wanted to participate in the study, the researcher included recent alumni of two years or less. Based on the definition of an adult learner, participants were expected to meet the initial criteria along with additional screening to assure participants had at least 12 credits with
Centrism College. The 12 credits criterion demonstrated that the participant had invested at least one full semester with the institution.

In addition, campus staff members were asked to make recommendations of students who met the criteria but were not captured in the 2015-2016 academic school year reports. Campus staff only made recommendations based on their experience with the students and were not informed of whom the researcher selected as an actual participant. The researcher emailed the participants first requesting their participation (see Appendix A). Participants were then given two weeks to respond to the email request. Additional, emails were sent out in an attempt to gain 10 participants. There were 10 participants who responded they were interested in the study, but only 9 participants were interviewed for the study. In the initial email, participants were informed of what the study entailed, and they were asked if they wished to participate. Those who wished to participate were asked to schedule a 60-minute interview time during the early fall session (August 29, 2016-October 22, 2016).

Criteria that were used to identify potential participants were:

- those who experienced academic difficulty while attending Centrism College;
- had completed 12 credits with the college;
- an adult learner (i.e., by definition 25 years old or older, independent of parents, employed, military, have a dependent, or had their education interrupted for two or more years following high school; Jacot, Frenay, & Cazan 2010) at least two areas need to apply and;
- was a current student or recent alumni of two years or less.

The criteria helped to narrow the search and identify those students who were no longer experiencing academic difficulty.
At most colleges and universities, there are usually warning signs before a student is dismissed from the institution. At Centrism College, usually there is a probationary period, followed by suspension, then three-year dismissal after continued poor academic performance. This was referred to as the academic dismissal pipeline. The participants for this study were undergraduate minority adult learners who were on probation, suspension, or dismissed while they attended this institution and had at least 12 Centrism College credits.

Undergraduate minority adult learners in this study were selected by the researcher with minimal consideration from the campus administration and the academic advisors who assisted them. Adult learners were categorized for this study as students who were out of high school for more than two years, independent from their parents, responsible for a dependent, and those who were working professionals. Jacot, Frenay, and Cazan (2010) defined adult learners as individuals 25 years old or older, who had their education interrupted for a year or more. At the time of the study, more than 150 minority adult students met the criteria for the study. Criterion sampling was most suitable for this study because participants consisted of only undergraduate minority adult learners who had experienced academic difficulty. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated, “criterion sampling worked best when all the individuals studied represented people who had experienced the same phenomenon” (p. 104). With prior permission from the campus director, participants were asked to schedule an interview appointment during the midterm week of the eight-week early fall session. Interviews took no more than 60 minutes to complete. Interviews were tested on staff members who had experienced similar difficulty to validate the timeframe for completion. Creswell (2012) asserted that one-on-one interviews were useful when participants were expressive and willing to be open and honest about their experience (see Appendix C).
Data

It was possible that the researcher for this study could have had some form of prior interaction (i.e., email, face-to-face advising, or advisement via phone) with the participants. The researcher attempted to be aware of personal bias, prejudices, prior knowledge of participants’ experiences, and prior knowledge of Centrism College while conducting this study. Asselin (2003) stated, “it was best for the insider researcher to gather data with her or his ‘eyes open’ (as cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) added that participants were more apt to share with the insider researcher because of the researcher and participant relationship. In addition, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) cited Talbot (1998-99) in her research regarding the phenomenon of mothers who experienced the death of an only child, the participants in her study stated that they would have never shared their experiences if she [Talbot] had not experienced the same type of bereavement. Likewise, the researcher in the study also used her personal and professional experiences to relate to the participants to acknowledge that there was a phenomenon that needed to be addressed.

At the time of this study, the researcher was an academic advisor, who often encouraged her students to take the preparatory and developmental courses as a refresher based on her personal experiences as a first-year college student. The researcher believed she was underprepared as a first-year college student and enrolled in a preparatory English course while her friend decided not to enroll in that course. Her friend, who was on scholarship, had taken advanced courses in English while in high school, which allowed her to bypass the preparatory English courses in college. The researcher was not as confident, and she had not taken advanced courses while in high school. The researcher was terrified, but she was willing to learn. So, she started at the bottom, while her friend started in the advanced courses. She had an opportunity to take the preparatory courses just as a refresher since college can be very different from high
school. In the end, the researcher graduated with her bachelor’s degree and later pursued her master’s degree. Her friend did not complete her bachelor’s. The moral of the story was that sometimes fear could force a person to want to do better and confidence turned into cockiness could lead one to succumb to failure or defeat. Therefore, interviews from participants in this study were used to tell similar stories that involved motivation factors that forced them to do better. Interviews and questionnaires were used to gather the lived experiences of minority adult learners who had at some point experienced probation, suspension, or dismissal while at Centrism College. Interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants to speak candidly about his or her background, education, along with other experiences.

**Participant Selection**

For the purpose of this study, data collection consisted of a questionnaire and interviews with nine undergraduate minority adult learners attending the Centrism College-Central Florida campus who have been placed on probation, suspension, or academic dismissal during their collegiate careers. Participants were selected using internal WebFOCUS reports generated at the end of each session. The reports helped to inform the campus about which students have been placed on probation, those who were on continued probation, and those who had moved to suspension or dismissal status. Prior approval to use these reports for this study was granted by the site director, the senior director of Student Success, and the Protection of Human Subjects Committee. In addition, campus staff members were asked to make recommendations for those students who also met the criteria but were no longer on the reports. Campus staff only made recommendations based on their experience with the students and were not informed of who was selected as an actual participant. Participants were emailed first requesting their participation (see Appendix A). Participants had two weeks to respond to the email request, after which,
emails requesting the participation of additional students were sent to assure that the desirable participants were received. In the initial email, participants were informed of what the study entailed and asked if they wished to participate. Those who wished to participate were asked to schedule a 60-minute interview during the early fall (eight-week) session.

Once the interviews were scheduled, the date and time were confirmed. Upon their arrival and prior to the start of the interview, the participants were given a consent form outlining the nature of the study as well as the protection of their identity and information (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to sign the consent form and asked if both audio recording and notation could be used for accuracy. A brief explanation of the study was given describing the purpose of the study, along with the process of participant confidentiality, and consent form. Participants were told that their participation was completely voluntary and would have no effect on their grades, interaction with the researcher, or Centrism College. Each of the nine participants agreed and signed the consent form. The participants were given a questionnaire to collect demographic information. The interviews started after the questionnaire was completed. At the end of each interview, member checks were completed prior to the submission of the data analysis. Once the transcripts for the interviews were complete by Rev.com, the participants were emailed their interview transcripts and were told they had the right to omit, change, revise, or decline to review their interview. No changes were made, and the participants were satisfied with their interview responses. Each of the participants received a copy of their signed consent form. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without prior notice.

During the interview, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their life experiences and how this affected their educational journey. Using the phenomenological
approach to collect data, transcripts were analyzed. The findings were used to make recommendations on how to serve the minority adult learner population better while adding depth to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) as it related to students who have experienced academic difficulty. Data collection took place at Centrism College-Central Florida campus, which was an extension of a Midwest-based private college. The location of this campus was in an urban area minutes away from tourist attractions such as Disney World and Universal Studios. When preparing to collect data for this study, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested providing contextual, demographic, perceptual, and conceptual information. Based on the questions and exploration of this study, the researcher required contextual, demographic, and perceptual information.

The Central Florida campus had experienced some small changes with its academic advising team as enrollment numbers steadily declined. The campus had lost one advising position that, in turn, increased the workload of the remaining advisors. The campus currently operates with a director, an assistant director, three administrative assistants, and four academic advisors.

Academic advising services at Centrism College assisted students with the development of personal strategies for educational attainment. According to the academic advising syllabus, advisors were to:

- be accessible for meetings during office hours by appointment, telephone, or email;
- be responsive to student concerns and respectful of students’ values and choices;
- be an advocate for students while maintaining confidentiality pursuant to Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws;
• maintain accurate records to track progress and identify opportunities to meet and enhance students’ academic goals;

• understand and effectively communicate curriculum requirements, academic policies, and procedures to help students develop realistic plans for efficient degree completion (Academic Advising, SharePoint internal communication, 2016).

As Centrism College continued to evolve, a number of the processes that were in place to benchmark an advisor’s interactions with a student had been deferred while new plans were being sought. The mission of Centrism College has been to “improve the lives of diverse undergraduate and graduate learners through exemplary teaching” (Centrism College, 2014). The core values of the college are student centrism, lifelong learning, ethics, citizenship, flexibility, innovation, quality, improvement, civility, respect, and environmental and fiscal stewardship.

Demographic information was collected from the participants to explore background data that was used to further explain their worldviews of their experiences. Participants received a questionnaire with demographic information regarding their gender, age, ethnicity/race, education, and major. The participants were asked a number of questions in an interview regarding their personal experiences and academic experiences (see Appendices C, D).

Following the collection of the demographic information, participants were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of their experiences. This allowed the participants to speak candidly about what took place in their personal life, and how Centrism College may have failed to respond to their needs, or even the lack of focus they might have experienced at the time. Once interviews concluded, member checks were conducted in which each participant was able to review his or her responses and clarify, amend, or omit as needed. Data were analyzed using the guiding research questions.
Research Questions

1. What factors do students perceive have contributed to their poor academic performance as undergraduate minority adult learners?

2. What past educational experiences do undergraduate minority adult learners believe have affected their ability to adapt to college as adults?

3. What psychological needs are most important to undergraduate minority adult learners who experience academic difficulty?

Analysis

For this qualitative study, the researcher used a phenomenology approach to collect the data using questionnaires and interviews. Consent forms were given to participants upon arriving for their scheduled interview, followed by their questionnaire. Interviews were used to collect specific data on their educational experiences and background. After the interviews, transcription was conducted by Rev.com. Once transcription was complete the data were uploaded to NVivo to identify themes and categorize the responses. The NVivo software was used to analyze and compare participants’ responses in a storyboard formation to clearly identify any similarities they had using Swail’s geometric model and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Creswell (2013) simplified Moustaskas’ (1994) version of structured methods of analysis by suggesting writing down noteworthy statements, then grouping these statements into a developed textual description. The data received were analyzed from various angles to make sure that clustering, categorizations, and themes were representative of the minority adult learner population. The NVivo software makes it easy to review each question and response combination while organizing the data.
Provisions for Subject and Data Confidentiality

Only human subjects were used for this study. The researcher followed the guidelines set forth by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Human Subject Research (45 CFR 46; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009), which mandate privacy and protection of all participants. The researcher upheld Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) policies as well, which protected students’ rights and disclosure of non-directory information. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. All data collected were stored on a secure flash drive and kept in a security protected file. Confidentiality was a priority and participants were assured that data were protected. In addition, disclosure was only granted “to a school official with a legitimate educational interest. A school official was defined as a person employed by the college in an administrative, supervisory, academic or support staff position” (Annual notification of Right’s under FERPA, internal communication, 2015).

Participant Rights

Participants were sent an email that requested their participation in the study. Those who accepted were asked to set up an interview time. Prior to the interview, a consent form was given to the participants. This affirmed that their participation was voluntary and it had no effect on their grades or interaction with the researcher. All of their rights as participants were read to them and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and they could omit, change, or withdraw from the study at any time. The consent forms were dispersed to all of the participants outlining the nature of the study as well as the protection of their identity and information (see Appendix B). Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate minority adult learners who were all over the age of 25. All participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Minimal risks were associated with this study. The probability and
possibility of harm anticipated in this research were no greater than normal living or natural performance during an examination (45 CFR 46.102[i]). Exemption 45 CFR 46.101(b) (2) or (b) (3) may apply since the research involved interviews with the human subjects.

The interviews began with a questionnaire that collected demographic information for each participant. Once the questionnaire was completed, the interviews were recorded for accuracy. After the interviews had concluded, member checks were completed prior to the submission of the data analysis. Participants had the right to omit, change, revise, or decline to review their interview. Participants received a copy of their signed consent form.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations. Some students in the sample population did not wish to participate, which could limit the variety of the students. Another limitation was that the study did not have a large enough sample to be representative of all students who took courses on-campus as well as online. Most of the minority students attending Centrism College take their courses on-campus, in comparison to the White students who tend to take more courses online. Therefore, the study may not have adequate representation from the online environment. Last, not all students who were dismissed or suspended returned to the same institution. Some transferred to other institutions and some never finished their degrees at all. Furthermore, not all students who were dismissed or suspended would feel comfortable participating in the study. The study did not include feedback from faculty, staff, or the academic advisors at Centrism College. Centrism College has little or no data available regarding retention measures for the students who experience academic difficulty. Therefore, the data collected in this study were subjective and possibly difficult to measure.
Statement of Potential Research Benefits to Subjects

There were no known benefits for the participants in this study other than they would have an opportunity to share their stories. Their experiences shed light on the factors that exist when an adult learner is placed on probation, suspension, and/or dismissal. Interviews were stored by the researcher using a password-protected flash drive, which was kept at the home of the researcher. The researcher hoped that their participation would lead to enactment of changes to policy and establishment of a sound retention plan for struggling adult learners.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine what factors best predicted whether a minority adult learner would struggle with academic difficulty. Unlike other studies, which used quantitative research comparing withdrawal patterns and constructs, this study used representatives from the population of adult learners who experienced academic difficulty but later continued their education to learn about their experiences and motivation. Moreover, past studies have been fairly correct about what factors have affected their reasons for leaving or why they experienced academic difficulty, but most studies only broached the topic superficially. Investigating more deeply, students who faced financial hardship or family responsibilities may have experienced eviction, homelessness, failing health, or being the sole caregiver for an aging parent. Because of their responsibilities, their reasons for failing may have been due to their lack of understanding the college’s policy or the understanding of the consequences. The study might reveal that the technology could have plagued adults who have limited experience with computers and struggled with online courses. Yet, if the campus does not offer the courses the student needed to graduate, they could be forced to take courses online or transfer. These were merely examples of what the
research hoped to address so that the proper intervention programs could be implemented to bring to light the severity of factors affecting minority adult retention.

Chapter Four sought to give a voice to the study, by allowing nine undergraduate minority adult learners who have actually experienced academic difficulty to speak about their experiences. This study painted a vivid picture of what occurs when policy and student collide.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter depicts the lived experiences that minority adult learners had while pursuing a college degree. The results revealed the factors affecting minority adult learners by giving a voice to nine participants who had experienced academic difficulty, yet persisted.

As an advisor, the researcher has interacted with adult learners who have experienced academic difficulty on numerous occasions and not all of their stories are the same. The differences in their journeys prompted the researcher to dispel any deficit thinking that would assert that adult learners who experienced academic difficulty did so simply because they were lazy, or solely interested in receiving financial aid. It was assumed that the participants in this study may have experienced a lack of preparation, may have experienced tragedy, may have been employed, or may have increased familial responsibilities. As a result, they fell victim to academic difficulty, which resulted in poor academic performance. If these assumptions hold true, then this study will reveal their past educational experiences, how they overcame their obstacles, what factors motivated their return, and provide recommendations to the current retention plan. To understand better the scope of the participant’s experiences, Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs were used as the conceptual frameworks. The conceptual frameworks provided direction to the development of the research questions and addressed the wholeness of the participants from various layers.

Brief Review of Methodology

This phenomenological study sought to tell the journey of minority adult students pursuing their bachelor’s degrees who had experienced academic difficulty along the way. Moustaka (1994) suggested that phenomenological studies focus more on the description of the
experience rather than the interpretation of the researcher (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 80). A phenomenological study was conducted because the researcher hoped that the narratives of individuals might inform a proactive approach to retention efforts could be established not only at Centrism College-Central Florida campus, but perhaps elsewhere in academe.

Participants for this study were selected using WebFOCUS reports, which are internal reports that could easily identify when a student was placed on probation, continued probation, suspension, or dismissal, and when they were removed from such statuses. Prior approval was obtained from the director of the site, the college at-large, and the senior director of the Department of Student Success. The internal reports supported access to the desired criterion sample by identifying only those participants who experienced academic difficulty while attending the college. Once the initial criteria were met, the researcher conducted additional screening to ensure the participants had at least 12 credits with Centrism College, were 25 years old or older, and were current or recent college graduates of less than two years. Ten participants who met these criteria were emailed about volunteering for this study. All 10 participants responded, but only 9 continued with the process. Additional participants were contacted; yet, they failed to be interviewed even though they had expressed interest.

Data Analysis

Data for this study consisted of 60-minute interviews and a questionnaire used to gather demographic information of each of the participants. Member checks were conducted to finalize the approval of the participant data transcribed by Rev.com. After approvals had been made by the participants, the researcher analyzed the data using NVivo qualitative coding software. This section explains the coding, organization, and the interpretation of the data used in this study.
Coding

Each of the participants was given a pseudonym based on his or her most recent academic status. The first letter of the pseudonym was coordinated as follows: P-probation, S-suspension, D-dismissed, and A-alumni. The NVivo qualitative software was used to organize the data into nodes. Each of the transcripts was uploaded into the NVivo software to extract the data. Nodes were developed using frequently used words, phrases, and common themes that the participants expressed. The five needs of Maslow’s hierarchy were used in a separate NVivo file to create an organizational chart that filtered the participants’ responses to identify which needs were most important (see Appendix I). After the nodes were identified the researcher combined the commonalities it themes.

Organization

The nodes helped to create four generalized themes for the study: (a) overcoming obstacles, (b) struggling to adapt, (c) motivation to persist: balancing life, and (d) recommendations to Centrism College. There were 22 subthemes identified for this study. The theme overcoming obstacles included the subthemes: (a) family as an obstacle, (b) being unsure, and (c) health issues. The theme struggling to adapt had subthemes: (a) I wasn’t prepared, (b) childhood labeling, (c) lack of online course preparation, (d) lack of high school preparation, (e) online courses, (f) financial issues, and (g) testing skills. Under the theme motivation to persist: balancing life included subthemes: (a) intrinsic motivation, (b) change of learning environment, (c) extrinsic motivation, (d) family as motivation, (e) building classroom community, (f) learning skills, and (g) finding balance. Last, under the recommendations to Centrism College theme the subthemes were: (a) writing lab, (b) tutoring, (c) course availability, (d) time management, and (e) staff interactions.
**Interpretation**

Once the themes were organized, the researcher viewed the data using the two conceptual frameworks of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) and Swail’s geometric model (Swail et al., 2003). Through the use of the conceptual frameworks, the researcher was able to draw conclusions and answer the three central research questions in this study. Participant data were first viewed to interpret the factors that affected their persistence, which identified the obstacles they faced. In addition, the phenomenological data analysis was central in supporting the literature used in this study (Creswell, 2013). The insider researcher strived to recognize biases and prejudices when interviewing the participants. Asselin (2003) suggested that insider researchers should assume they know nothing about the phenomenon. The next section is an introduction and overview of the nine participants.

**Introduction of Participants**

The nine-undergraduate minority adult learner participants were two black males, five black females, one white female, and one female who did not disclose her race/ethnicity. The ages of the participants ranged from 30-62 years old with the average age of 43. Four participants had children under 18 years old in the household, 3 participants had 3 to 5 people in their household including adult children, and 2 participants had fewer than 3 people in the household. Each of the participants attended at least one other college or university before attending Centrism College. Several participants waited nearly 20 years after graduating high school to continue to pursue their college career. At the time of the interview, four participants were employed, and five participants were unemployed. Of the nine participants, each of them experienced probation, three participants experienced an academic suspension status at least once, and two participants were dismissed from Centrism College for three years before being
able to return. The participants were asked a series of questions to express what factors affected them while in college. Participants were given pseudonyms based on their most recent academic status; P-probation, S-suspension, D-dismissed and A-alumni. In the next section, the researcher introduces the participants and one word of phrase that conveyed each participant’s dreams or ambition.

**Peyton**

Peyton (31), “future mortician,” a single mother who overcame drugs, violence, and the AIDS epidemic in her community has the dream of becoming a mortician to provide a better life for herself and daughter. While dispelling the odds of educational labeling (e.g., ESL, slow, or dumb) Peyton has graduated with her associate’s degree and is now hoping to complete her bachelor’s degree in mortuary science.

**Denise**

Denise (41), “unqualified,” a single woman helping care for her ailing grandparents took on the responsibility without hesitation and found herself trying to juggle work, personal life, and school. With the overwhelming responsibilities, Denise viewed school as another setback until her boss approached her with a promotion that she did not qualify for because she had not received her degree. Now, the setback had become a set-up leading her toward her promotion.

**Alex**

Alex (55), “the Jaguar super fan,” was born to a young single mother in a small town in northern Florida. He was raised by his grandparents along with their nine children. Alex grew up playing sports and received a track scholarship to a local institution. After one year of college, his girlfriend conceived a child, and he dropped out and enlisted in the military to provide a better life for his growing family. After successfully putting his current and previous (now
divorced) wife through college he decided it was his time to complete the goal he started nearly 30 years before.

**Mrs. Pierre**

After having her first child at 16 years old, Mrs. Pierre (49), “the professional student,” married and started growing her family right away. This mother of four struggled to raise her children as a teenager but was determined to keep her family together. A native of Miami, Mrs. Pierre worked in the human services field testing potential AIDS & HIV victims; when the economy spiraled downward, she decided to become a correctional officer.

**Dominique**

Dominique (31), “determined,” a married woman caring for five children who grew up in a two-parent household that lacked educational support eventually found herself as a teenage mother struggling to find her way. After enrolling and then leaving several colleges, she returned to this college after being dismissed for three years because of multiple emotional and physical setbacks.

**Paul**

Paul (44), “the family man,” was born in a single-parent household. Along with his nine siblings, he grew up in the projects of Central Florida housing. After high school, he married and had 3 children; two attend college with him, and the other is attending a local community college. After 22 years of marriage and raising his children, he deemed it time to better himself by pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business administration.

**Allison**

Allison (50), “the soccer mom,” decided eight years after graduating high school that just working a job was no longer going to get her to the next level. As a mother of two and the
youngest of three, Allison viewed herself as the ultimate New Yorker and not even her financial issues could hold her back.

**Priscilla**

Priscilla (30), “the equalizer,” was an only child and a single mom from a small town. Priscilla moved to Central Florida with her mother after graduating high school. After studying at various trade schools, this mother of three black sons decided to pursue a degree in criminal justice to learn criminal law and how to respond to the police when approached. She wanted to educate her sons and others around her about the law and rights of people.

**Mrs. Pat**

Mrs. Pat (62), “the survivor,” married for 40 plus years, is a three-time cancer survivor, and life-long learner. Mrs. Pat fell in love following high school and decided to choose love over an educational scholarship. Through numerous bouts of chemotherapy, Mrs. Pat has worked in many different areas and has a wealth of experience but she was most fascinated with the human mind.

These nine participants represented the growing population of students who have experienced academic difficulty while attending Centrism College-Central Florida campus. Most of the participants were in their last two years of college, and the majority of the participants took courses both on-campus and online. With a diverse group of participants, their experiences provided a well-rounded scope of what adversities minority adult learners can face that lead to academic difficulty.

**Research Questions and Results**

Participants in this study were asked to be open and honest about their life experiences and the struggles they had while pursuing their degree. NVivo was used to categorize and
organize the results of the data (see Appendix K). The participants were asked to complete a pre-
interview questionnaire to collect demographic information followed by an interview of 20 questions.

When analyzing the interviews, it was clear that each participant had embarked on a journey that started years before they settled at Centrism College. Although their journeys differed, many of them traveled similar paths of single parenthood, single parent households, health concerns, and family obligations. The participants each shared stories of their obstacles, preparation, motivation, and the recommendations that could help other students. From each of the four major themes identified, subthemes were formed that addressed specifically what the participants experienced. In the next section, the participants started the interview by telling the researcher about who they were and where they were from.

**Tell me about yourself**

The first question the participants were asked was to tell the researcher about themselves. Pat started with:

Well, I am a senior citizen that decided to go back to school, I started back in 1993. I found out I have some health challenges. Found out I had cancer. Breast cancer and I had to stop, and so every time I would start back to school, I would get another diagnosis for cancer, so I’m a three-time cancer survivor, and I decided that that was not going to stop me, so I went after I overcame the third diagnosis, and cancer free, I decided to take some classes at CC online so that I could work as well.

Paul was rather reserved when responding to questions regarding his past outside of school. He mentioned he wanted to get his degree because he had started a business and wanted to learn
more about the business field. He decided to go back to college after leaving high school 20 years prior.

Alex was very willing to share his upbringing. Alex shared:

I grew up in a Baptist family. I was raised by my grandparents. My mom, she had me when she was young. I think she was eighteen, still trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. My grandparents, they took me from her, and they raised me. They had nine of their own, so it was a big family. That was in Palatka, a small … Palatka, which is between St. Augustine and Gainesville, little, small place. I grew up there, you know playing sports, going to church and that was it.

Peyton was bubbly and very excited about being interviewed. At first very reluctant, she decided to share because believed she had a story that could inspire others. Peyton explained:

I’m 31 years old, and I have a beautiful daughter. I’m in school currently studying funeral services, so I can have a career and possibly be able to take care of myself and my baby daughter. [I chose] my major? To be honest, it’s really hard working with people. It’s difficult to please people. So, in the funeral service, I feel I could be helping the community in a way and not have so much stress as pleasing people, cause it’s hard to please people in the world today.

When my grandmother passed away, I decided to study the profession. I was very interested in the profession and what the morticians do and how they work and how they actually help the community. It didn’t take me long. I’m young; I’m just 31. My grandmother passed away two years ago, and I’ve already received my associate’s degree, and I just recently got accepted to the mortuary program. So, two years. Once I set the plan, I started acting, and everything just started transpiring from there.
Dominique introduced herself in an expressive way. She said:

I am a mother. I’m a wife. Mother to five children. Blended family. We have the one on the way. I attend Rivers of Life Christian Worship Center. I’ve been a member there for about eight years. I currently work at [a local Florida college] as the administrative assistant in the Registrar’s office. I’ve been here now for about two and a half years. Just a busy mom and wife.

Mrs. Pierre started with an introduction similar to Dominique’s. She stated:

I have four kids, one who was developmentally delayed. I stayed home for the first seven years of his life because I had to take care of him. He had a trachea and a gastrostomy, too. From there, I went out to work, and when I went out to work I started at United Cerebral Palsy, I did Quest, DCF [Florida Department of Children and Families] all of that. I worked with juvenile justice. I worked with every aspect of human services, except geriatrics. I also worked HIV/Aids when I was in Miami. From Miami, I came to Orlando. When we moved to Orlando, I went to Orange County, but I went in as a pre-trial officer.

That was about 2005. When I went in as a pre-trial officer, I stayed there may be about four to five years. We decided to move back to Miami, went back to Miami and that’s when I went back into social services.

Priscilla walked in eager to share her story. She stated:

I’m from Florida. I’m from Lake City, Florida, and it’s a small country place. I was born and raised there. I came here when I graduated from there at Columbia High School. I’m the only child from both my parents, so me moving here at first, I was homesick because I wasn’t used to the big city and everything that’s going . . . I’m used to being in the
country where I don’t have next door neighbors . . . I’ve been here ever since, and that was back in ‘04 . . . I’ve always worked with children or adults with disabilities like group homes. I worked with the school system. . . . That’s mostly all I’ve done is work with disabled individuals.

Allison was in somewhat of a hurry but nonetheless willing to share what she experienced. When asked to tell about herself, Allison started with:

I am from Long Island, New York. I am a mother of two, and I am very much into higher education. I support it. My life is a mother, working, and a student as well myself.

. . . [I chose my major] because I’ve already done customer service and I picked Business because I kept telling myself [that I] want to go into management. I want [to] move further up the ladder and go into Business Management. I always thought of maybe opening up a business but that never really interested me much to go through further with it.

Last, Denise revealed she was:

Forty-one, single, no children, work for the school board, and I’m trying to get a better job. [I grew up in] Florida, Central Florida. Winter Garden area. Started off at, … First Baptist, kind of like a private school kind of thing. Then I went to public school, graduated from West Orange. Did nothing for a long time and then, of course, I started going to Barry. Actually, I was at Barry University, and I was taking Information Technology with a minor in Business Administration, and they dropped the program, and that’s why I went into Business Administration since I had started taking some business classes.
The introductions of the participants provided a glimpse into their past and some of their thought processes that would help when trying to understand the obstacles they had to overcome.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

As the participants began to speak about their early experiences in education, it was clear that their families or family structures played a major part in why they did not attend school immediately after high school and why they were not successful in school. Choosing family over college was mentioned by several participants who had an opportunity to attend college following high school. By choosing family, most of the participants did not have the opportunity to continuously enroll in school. They often *stopped out* and it took them longer to return as time went on. When family structures are not stable, one can find themselves unsure of what path to take. In addition to family and uncertainty, health issues were also posed as a major obstacle for the participants in this study. Health issues affected both the participants and a few of the participants’ family members in their care.

**Family as an obstacle.** It is often assumed that following high school, one would plan to enroll and finish college but for some; love, family, and starting a career prevail as the most suitable options. Mrs. Pat chose love over going to college:

> When everybody else went to college after high school, I did not. All my other classmates did; they went to college I had a four-year academic scholarship available to me at graduation from high school, but I didn’t take advantage of it because I thought I was in love, and I didn’t want to leave the man…now my husband of 43 years… I didn’t want to go away to college, and my scholarship was for Miami, and it was a foolish decision, but then who knows? Maybe it was my life’s destiny, so that’s why I made the decision.
She continued to reflect on what her life could have been but summed it up that it was her
destiny that things happened the way they did for her.

Alex, too, had a scholarship for college and even attended one year of college following
high school but later had to choose a different path.

When I finished high school, I had a scholarship. I was offered to go to many other
schools for track and field and for football. I decided to go for track. I did a year. After
that . . . [my] girlfriend got pregnant. So, I went into the military.

Alex decided to make a career out of the military and developed his leadership skills before re-
entering civilian life as a correctional officer. With a newly started family, his college endeavors
were placed on a brief hold, but he took advantage of the educational leadership opportunities
that the military offered as an added benefit.

Dominque had her first child in high school; yet, she was still determined to attempt
college after high school:

I actually started college very shortly…maybe about six or seven months after high
school. I did have a daughter in high school, so that kind of delayed my plans or kind of
changed my plans a little bit. I did start right after. I did a lot of starting and stopping
throughout the years. My parents have been married now for about 32 years, so I did have
that structure. I didn’t really have a support system from them as far as education because
they never went to school themselves. Pushing me to really go to school was never really
one of their strong suits.

Mrs. Pierre also had her first child while in high school:

I became pregnant at the age of fifteen. I had my first child when I was sixteen. My
Mom, who was at the time in a holiness church, a holy sanctified church, they say that
you should get married. I was pressed to get married, and I got married. From that
marriage, I had my four children, including the one that was handicapped. I was this
teenager raising these babies. They were all a year apart!

Mrs. Pierre mentioned that her third child was mentally and physically delayed, which caused
him to be hospitalized the first year of his life. By the time he was released from the hospital, she
had given birth to her fourth child. She talked about the hardship of raising “stair step” aged
children and the difficulty of raising one who was also developmentally delayed. Mrs. Pierre
continued:

From there, I was home . . . for about 12 years to make sure that my handicapped child
was okay, and to make sure that my other children were okay.

I had divorced when my son [handicapped child] was maybe about four or five years old.
Then I became… the single parent of four kids, again their father and their family,
paternal, was still in their life . . ., so they helped me out a lot. I worked at jobs that I
could . . . that didn’t interfere with my handicapped child’s schedule. I enjoyed working.
It was a way for me to get out of the house. I never was a woman that enjoyed being
home, because I had been home for so long.
That always made me feel like I didn’t contribute anything to society. With that being
said, yes, I was a welfare Mother. I was that Mother that depended on Medicaid and all
those other things.

With her voice cracking, Mrs. Pierre expressed that her developmentally delayed child died,
which drove her back into the workforce. She said:
My son passed away unexpectedly, and we decided to come back to Orlando, and I’ve been here ever since. That’s when I became a corrections officer, because at the time that’s when our economy crashed, so I had to reinvent myself.

Different events occurred in the lives of the participants that made them choose love, family, and even where to live. These different events can contribute to one being uncertain of the future, which can compound educational aspirations. One participant bravely admitted to being unsure of what she wanted to do with her education.

**Being unsure.** One issue that some adult learners experienced when enrolling into college was being unsure of what they wanted to study. Adult learners who are unsure often attend various colleges and take a plethora of classes. Some adult learners end up taking classes without a purpose, which results in them obtaining a number of electives, no real direction, and lack of degree completion. Once they discover what degree they’re most passionate about, it is sometimes financially too late. This largely affects adult learners receiving financial aid. Without having a clear educational goal, adult learners squander their financial aid by taking classes in various subjects or transferring to numerous institutions. Often, these adult learners do not have enough financial aid to continue the degree they truly want. Some adult learners find themselves enjoying a lot of different subjects but do not become an expert in any of them. This tends to exhaust the adult learner’s energy. As a result, these students enter their last semester just wanting to get the quickest degree possible. In this study, at least three of the minority adult learners have or will receive a bachelor’s of general studies degree for one of these possible reasons. Although they may have an interest in a specific subject, financially, they cannot pursue it or they no longer have the drive to continue. In most cases, these adult learners have met the
general education requirements needed for the general studies degree. Many adult learners have declared a minor in a specific subject to add meaning and value to their general degree.

Priscilla was a country girl who moved to the big city after she graduated from high school looking for a fresh start. She was raised by her grandparents and decided to move to Central Florida with her mother but was unsure of what she wanted to do.

This is my third time in college. I went soon as I graduated, but I went for massage therapy. I received my Associate of Science degree in massage therapy, but I just didn’t do anything with it . . . I also went for dental assistant, completed, graduated . . . I don’t know. I think I just went to school at first just because that’s what everybody told me to do. “You need to go to school.” I didn’t really take the time out to think what I really wanted to go to school for . . . I chose [Central Florida] because my mom was here . . . my mom left when I was in ninth grade, I chose to stay with my grandparents. I only took the state board once [for massage therapy]. I failed it, so it made me scared and I just never went back and did it.

Priscilla was one of the youngest participants, and in the interview, she mentioned having a lack of direction when it came to school. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to do with her life, and as a result, she changed paths multiple times. Unfortunately, before she could get a clear understanding of what she wanted to do with her education, she and her three children were in a car accident, which added to her obstacles.

My children and I were involved in a very bad car accident on May 18th, 2014. At that time, I had just enrolled in a semester. I had to withdraw, and I had to sit out the following semester. [But] I came back too early. I actually failed. I made a D and an F
that semester. . . . For the next year, I took 1 class per semester, [until] I was able to [enroll full-time]. It . . . it took me to fail that once.

The participant mentioned that failing her classes was an obstacle but was also part of her motivation to continue and to find what she wanted to focus her education on, which ended up being criminal justice. In life, there are always uncertainties that can arise. For some of the participants, health issues plagued their educational journeys.

**Health issues.** Health issues with self and other family members was another obstacle that hindered the participants. Several participants named health issues as one obstacle to their struggle to obtain a college degree. Whether it was multiple bouts of cancer or the need to care for other family members, these health issues emerged as obstacles to their college careers. Mrs. Pat thought that her multiple bouts with cancer often left her questioning whether a college degree was really necessary since her reason was not for a promotion or advancement; it was just a personal goal she was seeking. Mrs. Pat said:

The main challenges that I faced were my health concerns. I would start and then have to stop again. I would get a little bit discouraged sometimes because I kept aging . . . and the attention process and then when I would go back to school, return to the classroom, I felt a little bit inferior to those younger ones around me, but I’ve been so fortunate because the young people in the class . . . someone would always either be drawn to me, or I was drawn to them, and they would help me, but that was the greatest challenge. Probably feeling that because of my age, I couldn’t grasp the concept in the class as rapidly as they could, but eventually, I did, and like I said I’ve been very fortunate because if I was slow in a particular subject, someone would always help me out.
For some of the participants, health concerns extended beyond self and involved caring for the family. Denise was one of the few participants who experienced academic difficulty later in her degree progression:

My grandfather passed. We found out my grandmother had Alzheimer’s, so me and my brother was rotating caring for her while my father was still living in Atlanta. I was trying to do that along with working my full-time job and trying to go to school at the same time. My studying suffered, and I just stopped. Well, I had no choice.

The three subthemes identified as obstacles early in the participants’ educational careers were family, being unsure, and health issues. These obstacles were reoccurring for the participants as they struggled to adapt when they decided to further their education. Family was mentioned numerous times during the interviews by many of the participants in other areas of their journeys. There were three major issues that the participants had to overcome: family as an obstacle, being unsure, and health issues. Figure 2 displays the three subthemes listed under the theme of overcoming obstacles.

![Figure 2. Overcoming obstacles.](image-url)
In the next section, the participants move beyond overcoming their obstacles and explain the struggles they experienced. Each of the participants in this study had reservations about attending college as an adult. As a result, every participant mentioned struggling to be in college as an adult. Many of the participants lacked preparation, some struggled with taking an online class, and one participant reflected on being labeled with a learning disability as a child, which led her to struggle as an adult learner.

**Struggling to adapt**

Once the obstacles were identified by the participants, it was time to understand their preparation or the lack thereof, as they started or restarted their educational careers. Several of the participants mentioned the lack of preparation when deciding to enroll in college as an adult. Even though each of the participants had attended at least one other institution many of them still were not mentally or academically prepared. At least three of the participants attended a trade school in which the students focused on the trade at hand and not general education types of courses like traditional schools have (e.g., math, English, science, arts and humanities). This presented a number of obstacles such as taking courses that would not transfer into a traditional setting and taking courses that would later have nothing to do with their traditional degree.

**I Wasn’t Prepared.** When the participants were asked about their preparation for college the responses were “Nothing” [meaning they had no prior preparation] or “No prior tutoring, no prior studying.” These were two general responses from several participants when asked about their preparation for college even though they all had prior college experiences.

One of the participants stated, “No [no preparation]. I just thought that when I graduated high school I had the choices of going to work or going to the community college. I chose
to work. And then I got to the point where you get stagnant, so I wanted to go on and finally get my degree.

Another participant beamed when asked about her preparation:

I was excited. I wasn’t prepared, and my family didn’t know that I was going back to college. I wasn’t prepared, but I was excited about the journey. I was excited about the journey to myself, but I wasn’t prepared at all.

Being labeled, along with the lack of preparation and the uncertainty of what lies ahead for an adult learner can be an intimidating experience. A few participants went in-depth regarding the challenges they needed to overcome to be able to adapt to college life.

**Childhood labeling.** Peyton struggled because of the lack of preparation prior to attending college. She mentioned that she was labeled as a child as a slow learner, emotionally handicapped in primary and secondary school.

It’s very sad. . . . In the beginning, in the educational system, I was labeled as slow learning, SLD [specific learning disability], emotionally handicapped. I was labeled as all these things. I was placed in ESE [Exceptional Student Education] classes because the system said that I couldn’t comprehend or I didn’t understand what was going on in the classroom. I knew, even from third grade, the actual spelling tests we took, I knew those words and I knew how to spell them, but I wasn’t given the credit. So, it’s been real harsh. . . . My whole education drive has come from that stigma. They said I couldn’t comprehend; let me show them. So, that’s where I’m at today. I have to show the system that I have learned these things that you’ve tried to teach me. I can comprehend these things that’s in these textbooks. If you give it to me, I can comprehend it. I can learn it, and then I’ll know better for myself.
This is one possible response to being labeled as a child, to fight and try to prove them wrong. Others may just give up and accept the label placed on them. Peyton mentioned having the ambition to prove the education system wrong about her ability to learn even though she had been placed on probation while in college. Lack of course preparation was mentioned by one participant.

**Lack of course preparation.** For Alex, it was a single subject; math

Math, math kicked my butt. I saved it for last, Lord have mercy, and I think it was the first Math I flunked out [of] here. I hadn’t done Math in like 30 years. I was dreading the Math, I wanted time to focus on Math, so I saved it for last.

Alex took beginning algebra twice before deciding to wait until he completed all of his core requirements to attempt math for the third time. This is often not recommended for students to wait to take basic skills courses such as math and English near the end of their educational career but Alex is an example that it does work for some students because he only took intermediate and college algebra one time each. He added:

I remember this one teacher. He said, “Don’t let Math cause you not to graduate.” That stuck with me and just ate at me the whole time. I got a tutor, and I had my wife’s cousin tutor me. I would come early [to class]. I would leave late [from class]. My…last nine months of school here was all Math. Nobody thought it was a good way to do it… But for me it was the best way, I told myself “Oh you got to do it.”

In addition to having a lack of course preparation in college, the lack of high school preparation was also a factor that hindered the participants. It is possible that the participants in this study had a high school diploma or GED. Socioeconomic factors could have also contributed to the lack of preparation in high school.
Lack of high school preparation. For Paul, it was retaking the courses he dreaded in high school and adapting to a technology-based teaching style.

Taking two classes that I wasn’t good at in high school, and took them both at the same time. It’s kind of tough because when I was going to school, we didn’t have all the technology and stuff. So, it’s kind of different for me . . . the teachers back then were able to teach us a little more . . . now mostly everything is [on the] Internet.

Most of the participants in this study grew up in an era in which technology was not an essential part of life. In fact, it is possible that computer usage was extremely limited in their homes and schools. Therefore, it was not a surprise that online courses and the usage of technology were a struggle for at least one participant.

Online courses. Paul was extremely adamant about not wanting to take online or hybrid courses, but when his personal schedule did not present many options, he began his college career at Centrism College with a science hybrid course and English course. He failed both. He stated:

Due to some of us being out of school 20 years, and coming back, everything’s not fresh.

You’ve got some [instructors] thinking we’re just getting out of [high] school, and we should already know this, and sometimes we don’t.

The adjustments that some adult learners need to make to find what works best for them can come after several failed attempts at learning on their own. Once they determined the best method, success could manifest in the classroom.

More than 70% of the adult learners attending Centrism College received some form of financial aid assistance whether through grants, loans, or tuition assistance. However, two participants mentioned financial issues that caused them concern.
Financial issues. Some participants mentioned financial responsibilities as a major challenge that contributed to their poor performance. Peyton struggled with the idea of how to pay for college. She reflected on whether she should accept the federal student loans she was given.

The financial part is very hard. I don’t understand why is it so expensive to learn basic skills. . . . It’s expensive. . . . A lot of people . . . can’t afford college. They’re afraid to even borrow. I had to rise above it and say eventually I’ll have the financials to give it back.

Allison stated:

Just a lot of personal issues which hindered me in classes and stuff. I was going through just a lot of stuff with financial problems, and it made it harder to concentrate on working on my classes.

As mentioned by two participants, financial issues could be presented in various ways. It could lead to one question, if financing their education is worth accruing student loan debt or if continuing one’s education is important when family members are financially strained.

Testing skills. One participant mentioned that her testing skills hindered her success in the classroom. The participant said:

Well, I did have some problems with a couple of courses. My testing skills aren’t that great. I don’t do well with tests. [Advisors] helped give me some study guides, some study tips to help my performance when I go in to take tests and they offered that online. . . . With that help, I managed to bring my GPA up and continue my education.
When the participant was provided with resources, she was able to do better with her test anxiety and improve her GPA. Testing was identified as a factor that affected her poor academic performance.

The lived experienced of the participants in this study indeed demonstrated a journey that affected their ability to continue their educational aspirations. Several of the participants shared how their health, educational adjustments, caring for others, and financial issues affected their ability to pursue their education. As their journeys continued, the participants shared how they overcame their challenges and used them as motivation.

The issues that the majority of the participants faced were a lack of preparation, testing skills, being unsure, online courses, and financial issues. The seven areas that made it difficult for the minority adult learners in this study in most cases were in addition to the obstacles they mentioned they needed to overcome.

Figure 3. Struggling to adapt.
Figure 3 shows the seven major areas that the participants identified when trying to adapt to college. The participants identified how the lack of preparation, lack of course preparation, online courses, labeling, financial issues, testing skills, and being unsure could be reflective of past and present issues that could make the adaptation to the college environment somewhat of a struggle. Each of the participants expressed that they lacked preparation even though they had attended at least one other school.

In the last section, the nine participants in this study each identified those areas that they struggled with as an adult learner. Yet, each of the participants was able to persist and found a way to balance his or her personal life and continue his or her education. The next section elaborates on their motivations and how they were able to balance their lives. All of the participants in this study had responsibilities outside of their school life that were just as important to them. Understanding what motivated the participants to persist and how they balanced life was important when explaining the complex lives these minority adult learners lived.

Motivation to Persist: Balancing Life

Obtaining a college degree as an adult can present many challenges and require both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic support. Since each of the participants had experienced some form of academic difficulty, the researcher wanted to understand what made them persist. The participants acknowledged several reasons why they wanted to continue their degrees. A few mentioned it was for their children and some said for career advancement opportunities. Yet, the most common response that each of the participants expressed arose from intrinsic motivation; “I want to be proud of something,” “I have to do this,” “I wanted to be educated.” This response characterized the themes related to esteem and self-actualization, which are two areas that
Maslow’s hierarchy of needs addresses.

After being placed on probation, suspension, or dismissal one could become extremely discouraged and unmotivated, and some minority adult learners are. Students who are suspended from Centrism College are out for an entire semester, and those who are academically dismissed are out for three years. The researcher was fortunate to interview one student who had been suspended multiple times and two students who were dismissed for three years. The devastation that many adult learners face is that they are possibly first-generation college students and their ability to excel could affect future generations. Not all the participants were surrounded by poverty, but the majority of them were, and most did not have mentors in their communities to provide guidance. As their journey continued, they were faced with the decision of whether to continue or to be a victim of educational circumstances.

**Intrinsic motivation.** As an academic advisor, many times students enter advising sessions with confusion and discontentment when trying to understand their degree audits. It is common for students to misinterpret information regarding course selection and major area courses. Students are usually overwhelmed with the number of courses and credits they have remaining and often would rather quit than go any further. Those that experience academic difficulty could find themselves even more disheartened because at times they are encouraged to retake courses to increase their GPA, which seems like they are taking steps backward instead of moving forward.

One participant stated, “I’m motivated, and this is something I want to do.” Mrs. Pat was so very eloquent in saying, “Self-fulfillment because at the age of 62 it’s not about having a degree to get a better job. It’s about accomplishing a goal that I set for myself years ago, and feeling better about who I am today.” Mrs. Pat’s response exhibited self-actualization.
Dominque shared:

I think . . . I got to a point where I said, “I have to do this.” Once I did, in saying I’m passing the classes, saying I’m spending that time and getting the homework done, it’s like the light at the end of the tunnel. I’m almost there, and I can’t stop. Most important reason . . . is to finish it, to finish what I start. I started this [journey] years and years ago, and I haven’t been to a point where I was able to finish. Now I’m so close, so after all these years and all the money that I’ve spent, I need to have something to show for it . . . if I don’t then . . . I failed.

Dominque exemplified a student with determination who was able to build up her esteem. She was dismissed for three years, returned, and was demonstrating greater success in the classroom. Alex was one of the few students who was suspended more than once who actually graduated. Alex added that having a relationship with the academic advisors really helped him. Being able to know what classes he had remaining and how many classes he had really encouraged him to finish. Alex recalled a time when he met with his advisor and the motivation he received to continue:

“I’m telling you, at times it was like, “Man, I can’t even do this.” “Man, look I ain’t never going to finish. I’m going to be here forever, ever.” She [academic advisor] was like, “Well, [Alex], if you look at it, you’ve got one more class to do.” We looked at it and said, “You take this class, you get your two-year degree. Then, you got so and so left.” I was like, “For real?” [She] showed me the light at the end of the tunnel. I was like, “All right, I’m good.”

Allison decided to persist because she wanted to further her career. At the time of the interview, she was actually in the process of applying for the MBA program. She said, “I am still reaching
for my career. I may be fifty years old, but I still have ambitions, and I see myself higher up in management.”

Being able to feel hope allowed these participants to grasp the idea that degree obtainment was within their reach. With this light came a new outlook on life and rethinking how to continue to be successful. Rejecting deficit thinking leads one to change the things that do not work and leads one to find better ways to succeed. Intrinsic motivation was one of the most obvious factors that helped the participants to persist. One of the most profound words used was the pronoun “I” this expressed that the participants understood that the process of persistence started with them first. For some of the participants, understanding themselves led them to also understand what learning environment was best.

**Change of learning environment.** The participants fell into three categories when asked about their preference of learning environment. Some preferred online 100% of the time, some disliked online 100%, and some liked online but learned better in the classroom setting. The use of the online classroom environment was cited on numerous occasions by the participants as both good and bad. Online learning presents flexibility that the on-campus environment does not. One participant stated:

I actually love the online environment. For me, with my life and my schedule and what I have going on, it gives me opportunity to pace myself, whereas the classroom, I feel like I’m timed. I’m on a time limit. The online environment allowed me to log in at my leisure. I can log in 15 times a day if I want and be able to reach out to my teacher if I need to.
Mrs. Pierre was one of the participants who enjoyed online but found that online wasn’t always the best choice of a classroom environment. Mrs. Pierre took most of her courses online and had to adjust to the virtual world:

When I started at CC and doing it online, it was difficult because it took a while for me to learn that I had to organize myself. I had to learn the instructors, and I just had to learn which way they teach, and all of them teach differently. I find that some of them [professors] . . . the ones that have the criminal justice degree, to me, tend to be harder and harsher regarding students and what they [expect] . . . because they have done [it] so long. With other classes, it wasn’t as bad. I’m not talking about the work because I understand with online you’re going to get more work. The work did not bother me.

Although Mrs. Pierre enjoyed online courses, the continual drop in her GPA made her realize that interaction with the instructor and fellow classmates could be vital to her success.

Many of the participants had similar views about finishing their degree, but not all of their motivation was internal. Extrinsic motivation was another factor that was mentioned by essentially all the participants. Along their journeys, support from classmates, family, friends, co-workers, the college faculty, and staff helped to provide them with the external motivation they needed.

Extrinsic motivation. Among the themes that helped to motivate the participants was the establishment of a support system both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants expressed that the support they received from family, co-workers, and friends was also a motivation. Mrs. Pierre stated she received a great deal of support from family. Family support was a major comment made by the majority of the participants. Priscilla added that her mother and grandmother both helped her with her children. They relieved her of the burden of locating
childcare. Dominque mentioned her husband assisted her with her children to make sure she was able to complete her course assignments and her exams. For Denise, it was her co-workers who kept her on track. Denise said, “Everybody’s all behind me. They’re like, “Oh, don’t you got homework to do?” I’m like, “Really?” Everybody’s been very supportive.” Within the theme of extrinsic motivation, there were specific subthemes that participants identified that were worth mentioning.

**Family as motivation.** When the participants were asked to elaborate on their inspiration to continue their degree, family and children were mentioned yet again. One participant stated:

> My kids are the main focus of why I’m going to school, because my thing is, if I can do it, I know you all can do it. So, if I’m going, I want my kids to go. So, that’s pretty much my main focus of why I’m going to school.

One participant stated that being a mother was her greatest inspiration because she wanted to share what she knew with her child. She said, “So that [my daughter] can be just as educated as I am.”

Dominque added that her children were also her motivation and inspiration:

> My children [inspire me] because ultimately, I want them to see that it can be done. I’m a wife, a mother, and a daughter, but you can still get it done, no matter what age. I’ve been here 31 years. I can still get it done. I want them to know that no matter what you have and what you have going on in your life, you can get it done. They are my inspiration.

Another participant said, “My wife. She said, “You [have] no excuse, no more. Go and get it.”

Mrs. Pat was very colorful in saying:
So many people have inspired me—friends and family. They encourage me. Matter of fact, they really want me to go to law school after college, and I tell them they’ve lost their minds. I do not see another three-four years in school at my age.

The participants demonstrated coping skills as they managed their personal, professional and academic lives to continue their educational journeys. Many of the participants spoke about their needs to be socially engaged, their religious beliefs, and other activities. Several participants elaborated on the importance of family since most had a family member, friend, or co-worker there to remind them of their purpose and encourage them to continue their degree regardless of their individual obstacles. The motivation to continue also was part of the community they formed inside of the college classroom.

**Building classroom community.** One of the questions asked was if the participants preferred taking classes with people they knew or did not know. Of the participants, 90% stated they enjoyed taking classes with people they did not know vs. those who they did. One participant mentioned liking both but later stated that taking classes with those she did not know helped her grow. Alex said:

I prefer taking classes with people I don’t know. When you take classes with people you do know, you don’t get the great learning experience because if you already know me and I already know you, I already know what you’re going to do, you know what I’m going to do, most people are going to sit back [and say] we’ll just copy him.

The example Alex provided could be why most of the participants preferred taking classes with people they did not know. Like others, Alex believed that taking classes with people they knew limited them in their thinking and their education. The participants believed that if they also took classes with friends their friends would rely on them more for the answers rather than learning
the material for themselves. By making friends with other classmates, they are building a learning community and network where everyone worked together to excel in the classroom. The participants viewed friends and classmates slightly differently. Based on observations during the interviews, friends were considered those with whom the participants interacted outside of school while a classmate was a person typically only seen while at school. Although classmates can become friends over time, their friendship is as a result of their interactions while at school, not outside of school.

Other participants such as Dominque conveyed a similar response, “If I take a course in a classroom setting I preferred taking classes with people I don’t know. If you take classes with people you know, it can be some form of a distraction to you.”

Mrs. Pat gave an example of how community is developed when students interact with people they do not know:

Being in this class . . . nobody knew me there . . . I was able to take away from them. They became my mentors, even though I am older than them, but they become my mentors and were able to show me different ways that I can solve a problem that I thought maybe too difficult.

Academically, participants enjoyed building their own “family” within the classroom environment. A participant stated; “In any learning setting, I’m there to learn something. Whether I know the person next to me . . . maybe this is an opportunity where I can get to know the person. I’m a people person.” It was previously mentioned that the participants preferred taking courses with people they didn’t know and the establishment of this family-like structure could be the reason. A second participant added, when referring to the same question of taking courses with people known or unknown, “To me, it doesn’t matter, knowing, or not knowing,
because I’m a friendly person, so I’m going to get to know you by the time I finish anyway. It’s really no issue with me.” Most of the participants had similar responses like this one, “I prefer taking courses with people I don’t know because I want to learn constantly, and if I take classes with people I know, I’m somewhat limited.”

The participants in this study expressed the need to build community and establish friendships in the classroom. For some participants, knowing how to build community also was part of the learning skills they developed.

**Learning skills.** In addressing learning skills, participants engaged in three-way learning opportunities where they learned from others, they learned more about themselves and even taught others. One of the participants explained, “Every day that I live, I embrace a new challenge, and I look forward to learning something from someone about not only them but about myself.” Alex recalled a time when he helped others in his class overcome their fear of public speaking:

I remember . . . taking a Speech class. I had already taught in corrections law, so teaching and doing the speech lessons didn’t bother me . . . I could not believe some people would actually want to take a zero than get up there and speak.

He elaborated that he would encourage his fellow classmates not to fail the speech but take their time and give it a try. He ended by saying:

It was just great to see people get up there from different places, with different accents from other languages, Haitian, from Jamaica. . . . I was like, wow, to watch some of them at the end be able to get up there and speak and do good. . . . I was like, “Wow, that was great.” Made me think about when I started.
The participants’ social factors played a major role in both their academic and personal lives. The majority of the participants experienced having a social connection with classmates, faculty, and staff. When asked if they had any challenges and if the college was able to assist, the participants made comments like, “They [CC] helped me figure out where my weaknesses were so that I can work at it and I did . . . that’s what got me into this position I’m at today.”

The idea of community that the participants spoke of extended outside of the classroom as well. Whether active in church, having family time, or simply spending time with their children all of the participants had obligations to activities in addition to school that helped them to find balance.

**Finding balance.** It was clear that family was a prominent part of the lives of these minority adult learners because when asked what activities were most important to them spending time with family was a common response. Early on, the participants struggled to find the balance of family and the motivation to pursue education. Those who tried later found that the balancing act had become overwhelming, as their personal lives had taken center stage. Six of the nine participants were married, and all but two of the participants had biological children. The participants shared that family was a major component for them wanting to get their degree. Participants were asked what types of activities they participated in outside of school. One participant disclosed:

I’ve been on a rocky road with my marriage for a lot of years . . . my husband and I because we were young and inexperienced when we got married, so we separated a lot. I’m a strong woman. I don’t have any children, natural children. My husband does, so I’ve embraced his two kids as my step-children.
Over time, the participant and her husband grew together, which had given her the strength to continue her education. She continued by stating:

My family is very supportive, especially my husband, he’s very supportive. If I’m studying, they know to give me quiet peace, study time. If I need something from them, like space, basically, because I don’t ask them for anything else. They know when it’s mid-term or finals, don’t bother her, she’s studying, or when I tell them I have a certain day I got to get a paper in or an assignment completed, they’ll give me my space, but that’s pretty much all I need from them- is to be able to focus and study.

Dominque started with:

I’m really a homebody, honestly. A lot of activities I really don’t care to do. For the most part, activities for me is going out to the movies or going out to dinner. That’s kind of activity for me. I’m not a very adventurous person, so a lot of things like that don’t really excite me. Kind of going out and maybe walking around on my own for a little bit, that’s a highlight for me.

The two participants agreed that spending time with family and watching sports were at the top of their activities lists outside of school. Mrs. Pierre stated:

Outside of school most important to me—keeping my family together. I’m the one who sets the dates for us to go out and have dinner, do the get-togethers, decide what we’re going to do. I want my kids to be close, even when they have difficulties between each other. My family is from Miami, which is my Mom and my sister. They come up often. It’s important to me to keep them together. Basically, that’s my activity. I also run my husband’s business, so I’m busy with that as well. As far as activities is concerned, it’s to keep my family together.
Another participant stated:

My children [are my activities]. I don’t work right now because . . . the kids we were in an accident, so I have to get them to therapy and different doctor’s appointments. Then I had them try out for baseball, so that’s pretty much my life outside of school.

Denise smiled when she asked about activities outside school. She, too, enjoyed spending time with family and football games. She also mentioned that she volunteered for the team of Teen Achievers at the Young Men’s Christian Association. Like a few other participants, she said she attended church with family and that most of her activities involve family and friends.

Another participant added:

Church. That’s the main focus—ministry. Serving God. Being accessible and available to people. Through this life, I’ve gained wisdom, and so a lot of people that don’t really know how to get to certain places or haven’t learned what I’ve learned, will call me and so I try to make myself available to them, and I call that ministry. For that’s more important, the work that I do for God, making myself accessible to people, that need a helping hand, that means more to me than even my education.

Finding balance with outside activities created a sense of an outlet for the participants. It was obvious when the participants mentioned their outside activities that those things were just as important as their education. During the interviews, the participants expressed that making their families proud and spending time with family was extremely important because of the sacrifices their families made for them. Motivation to persist and balancing life presented a circle of persistence.
Figure 4. Motivation to persist.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

As part of understanding the participant’s perceived motivation, each participant was given a ranking question using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Table 1 lists how the participants viewed each of the five needs.

This ranking question used the same sentences developed by Goebel & Brown (1981). The sentences were:

- I like doing things which make other people look up to me. (Esteem)
- I like doing things with my friends and family. (Love)
- I like doing things which fill my physical needs. (Physiological)
- I like doing things which let me develop my talents or interests. (Self-actualization)
- I like doing things which are planned ahead. (Security)

Goebel and Brown (1981) used the participants’ responses to evaluate the most important needs for motivation from childhood to adulthood to identify which needs were more prominent at the
various age group. Their study also provided insight into how the needs were used as motivational factors by both age groups and gender. The participants in this study were given the same statements to determine which needs the minority adult learners believed to be most important. The responses were: 1) love and belonging, 2) self-actualization, 3) security, 4) physiological, and lastly esteem. It was rather interesting that esteem was the least important need on the participants’ questionnaires, yet, during the interviews, it was clear that esteem was actually very important. Since the statements were designed over three decades ago, so the participants may not have understood the nature of the statements. The statements could have been too vague and when reading the participants could have been confused when trying to apply the statements to their academic and personal lives.

Table 1

*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Participant Rankings*

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<tr>
<th># of participants</th>
<th>People look up to me Esteem Needs</th>
<th>Friends and Family Love and Belonging Needs</th>
<th>Physical Needs Physiological Needs</th>
<th>Talents and Interests Self-actualization Needs</th>
<th>Planned Ahead Security</th>
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*Recommendations to Centrism College*

In this section, the researcher was able to gather the participants’ recommendations to Centrism College based on their experiences. During their interviews, the participants were
asked what resources and services were needed. This section was comprised of the responses to two ranking questions and their interviews. To gather what types of resources and services the participants thought were most important the participants were asked to choose from a list of options that the local site may or may not offer. The options they were given were: student affairs, student disabilities, financial aid, student organization, library, computer labs, tutoring services, academic advising, career services, counseling services, writing center, student government association, other.

Participants were able to select all the resources that were important to them. The participants responded with: financial aid (6), academic advising (5), career services (3), student affairs (2), tutoring services (2), counseling services (2), computer lab (2), library (1), and student disabilities (1), as the services and resources that they believed to be most important to them in college. Six of the participants agreed financial aid was the most important resource in college, five participants mentioned academic advising, three selected career services, two participants viewed student affairs, tutoring services, counseling services, and computer lab access as equally important and participants viewed library and student disabilities services as important. None of the participants listed student organizations, student government associations, or the writing center as important resources.

The participants were asked to include what services and resources could have helped them before they experienced academic difficulty. One participant responded, “I think . . . the tools and resources were there, I just did not reach out to those tools and resources.” Some participants mentioned that resources were available, but not all of the participants took advantage. One of the questions reflecting how often the participants came on campus to utilize the resources that the site did offer included; resources lab, computer lab, or academic advising
services. The participants responded as follows: never (4); daily (2); sometimes 1-4 times per week (2); no response (1). Alternatively, participants who developed relationships with their academic advisor were able to gain the assistance they needed and, participants were able to provide additional comments to elaborate. One participant mentioned that she struggled with plagiarism. Yet, none of the participants selected the writing lab as an important resource on their questionnaire.

**Writing lab.** I’ve always had [an advisor] from beginning to the end, and…always been very straightforward. I think that not knowing of the definition of plagiarism was a big deal for me. . . . That’s something I dealt with, with the online teacher- Who explained to me, and she was the same online instructor who told me about going to the tutoring and going to the writing lab.

However, participants are not always aware of the resources available to them, which could have helped them beforehand.

**Tutoring.** Several participants mentioned the need for tutoring. Most of the time tutoring is only available to the students in the particular on-campus courses and students taking the same course online are prohibited from engaging in a tutoring session provided by on-campus faculty. One participant suggested, “Maybe it would be better to, even if I was taking classes online maybe have some type of tutoring on campus for those people as well.”

It seems that tutoring has been an area that both online and on-campus participants believe should be improved and at least advertised as a possible option.

Priscilla stated:

I guess . . . what caused me to go on probation was when I failed those courses. . . .

Maybe extra tutoring. . . . I don’t really know how their tutoring works here. Is it in
person or I don’t know, but I would say probably tutoring or something. If you failed or if a teacher sees you doing bad in the middle of the semester, they should refer you to go to tutoring. Not just sit and wait until week six and be like, “Oh, you have two weeks to pull your grade up.”

The lack of knowing what resources are available addresses the last factor of the geometric model, which is institutional. The institutional factors are the resources such as tutoring, student services, financial aid, curriculum, recruitment, and academic services. In an effort to identify what factors could have helped these participants and what services were most important the participants were given an opportunity to share their thoughts and make recommendations. The participants named course availability, tutoring, time management, and staff interaction as the institutional areas that could improve. Course availability is often a problem for certain degree programs that have limited student interest such as computer information systems majors, accounting majors, psychology majors, and even junior and senior level human services and business courses. Classroom space is also limited, which makes scheduling courses a task for campus administration.

**Course availability.** The only thing I think the college could do is offer more courses. What I’m seeing is, when we’re getting closer to [the end of] our degree, we don’t offer the classes, and we have to go online to take the classes. So, people who are hands on, like I said, I’m a hands-on person, I prefer to be in a classroom, then being online. That’s pretty much, if school could open up more classes for us, that’d be cool. That’d be wonderful.

Allison made a similar comment, “I think I’d like to see, for the classes I took, there was some I’d rather have seen . . . on campus more frequently.”
A skill that is difficult to teach is how to manage one’s time. Since every adult learner is different, the way they organize their lives will be based on what works best for them. Prioritizing family, work, and school responsibilities has to be established, or one may find himself or herself overwhelmed.

**Time management.** This also emerged as a challenge. One participant believed that time management was something that could have helped her before she was placed on probation, “My time management, because that was one of the tips I got out of the link. [I need to] manage my time, don’t be a crammer. I was a crammer.” The participant was referring to the online resources that she was given to help her as a way to improve her GPA. Study skills among the participants changed to improve their grades and comments such as, “I think I could have helped myself with a better study habit” were used to illustrate that one’s study habits and ability to have sound study skills added to their cognitive understanding.

**Staff interaction.** One of the participants recounted an incident when she encountered an unpleasant exchange with a front office staff member that she believed should be addressed. Normally, she has had good interactions with faculty and staff, but her one experience was cause for alarm.

There’s one lady that answers the phone that is a little bit confrontational. I would enhance her people skills, her personality development, maybe. She’s a little bit aggressive because . . . we had a conversation on the phone, and she said: “ma’am, calm down.” And I wasn’t upset, and I didn’t even raise my voice, and that really bothered me, but that would be the only thing. Just make sure that the people on the front line on the phone don’t misconstrue.

The participant continued by saying:
When you tell a person to calm down, what you are [saying] is “you’re upset,” and you don’t know people enough to know whether they’re upset or not, so I would teach my frontline telephone people or the ladies that are the frontline not to use language like that. If you de-escalate a situation, just sometimes use a different method, a different tactic. That’s what I would do.

The participants made their recommendations based on their interactions with the college and their personal experiences. Most of their recommendations were external. However, time management had both internal and external implications. Implementing a writing lab that addresses plagiarism, tutoring, course availability, and staff interactions were recommendations that the institution could provide or improve upon based on the participants’ perspective.

**Swail’s Geometric Model**

The second ranking question in this study utilized Swail’s geometric model to understand how the participants perceived themselves in relation to their cognitive, social, and institutional interactions. Participants were asked to select one of the following statements:

- I feel cognitively strong, socially strong, and I like the institution; perfect polygon (PP).
- I feel cognitively strong but socially weak; cognitive strong, socially weak (CSSW).
- I feel socially strong but cognitively weak; socially strong, cognitively weak (SSCW).
- I feel socially and cognitively strong, and I neither like nor dislike the institution; socially strong, cognitive strong (SSCS).

Of the participants, 90% responded that they were a PP and 10% of the participants identified as a SSCS. This seemed to represent their responses well because only one participant had a desire to transfer to another institution. Each of the participants believed that they were strong in each of the three areas, which was reflected when the participants discussed their time management
skills, learning skills, social interactions with family, faculty, classmates, and friends. Through the lens of Swail’s geometric model, the participants performed better in the classroom when equilibrium was present in their lives. The participants who realized which learning environments worked better were both representative of the social and institutional factors and those who worked to improve their writing and math skills increased their cognitive abilities.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences that minority adult learners faced while pursuing their degree after a period of academic difficulty. Participants were asked to complete a pre-questionnaire and interview questions to identify the obstacles they experienced, what made them want to persist, and what contributed to their success. Member checks were completed, and participants had an opportunity to make changes to their transcripts. NVivo was used to organize data and identify frequently used words and themes. From the interviews, four themes emerged: (a) overcoming obstacles, (b) struggling to adapt, (c) motivation to persist: balancing life, and (d) recommendations to Centrism College. The four themes contained subthemes that examined the participant’s experiences more closely.

In this chapter, the participants discussed their obstacles, how family could be an obstacle and motivation, their motivation to persist, balancing their life and recommendations that could have helped them before experiencing academic difficulty. This chapter sought to give a voice to those who experienced academic difficulty and what the college could do to retain its students better. Chapter Five analyzed the data using the literature review and conceptual frameworks.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The minority adult learners who attended Centrism College-Central Florida campus have been the focal point of this study because of the increased number of students who have experienced academic difficulty. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that motivate undergraduate minority adult learners to persist after a period of academic difficulty, investigate the relationship between their motivation and poor academic performance while linking their needs to the institution’s role in the retention process. A qualitative, criterion-based study was used to gather data through interviews from minority adult learners who were current students or recent alumni. In this chapter, the researcher reviewed the research questions, interpreted the findings, and provided recommendations.

The goal of this study was to identify the factors that motivated undergraduate minority adult learners viewed through the conceptual frames of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement. The conceptual frames were instrumental in streamlining the interview questions, which focused on the participant’s obstacles, and motivational factors, along with the analysis of the data which led to the emergence of several themes and subthemes. Much of the research on student persistence is often from the perspective of traditional-aged students and not always inclusive of those who are considered adult learners. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) stated, even with the shift in higher education, adult students have not been given the credit they deserve for their contribution, which is demonstrated in the lack of research available on the topic of adult learners. The lack of research on adult learners leads one to believe that some institutions are neglecting the needs of their adult learner population. This may be especially true of those adult learners who have
experienced academic difficulty. The motivation of an adult learner differs based on his or her experiences, educational background, ability, and overall attitude toward learning (Chao, 2009). Previous research has shown that successful students were usually those who established a relationship with faculty, staff, and an academic advisor. (Drake, 2011).

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of the participants framed by the combination of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement based on the following criteria: be an adult learner 25 years old or older, have experienced academic difficulty while attending Centrism College, have completed 12 credits with the Centrism College, and be a current student or recent alumni of two years or less. Participants in this study were asked a series of questions surrounding their past educational experiences, support, interactions with faculty and staff, and challenges during the pursuit of their degree along with their motivation, needs, and recommendations. Once the interviews concluded and were transcribed by REV.com, NVivo was used to code and categorize responses. Four major themes were identified based on the participants’ responses: overcoming obstacles, struggling to adapt, motivation to persist: balancing life, and recommendations to Centrism College. The participants’ insights were used to address the research questions for this study.

**Interpretation of Findings**

This section discusses the findings that resulted from the data collected from the nine participants in this study. This section makes connections to the literature on the retention of minority adult learners based on two conceptual frames. There were three central research questions used for this study.
Research Question One

To answer the first research question, “What factors do students perceive have contributed to their poor academic performance as undergraduate minority adult learners?” the researcher analyzed the responses that the participants shared in Chapter Four. The next section discusses the findings in light of the existing body of literature.

Lack of preparation. Under the theme of struggling to adapt in Chapter Four, lack of preparation was the general sentiment of the subthemes, which were: I wasn’t prepared, lack of high school preparation, lack of course preparation, and online courses were among those areas discussed. Even though the nine participants in the study had prior college experiences, each of them stated they lacked preparation. One participant indicated that the courses he did not do well in while in high school were the same courses he failed in college. This led him to struggle in the classroom. Haycock (2001) asserted that the lack of student preparedness is linked to low economic communities, limited resources, and the lack of instructors who are culturally competent. At least three participants stated they grew up in low-income economic areas, and at least four participants disclosed they were born to single-parent households. Swail et al. (2003) stated approximately 40% of new first-year college students do not read or write at the collegiate level. Furthermore, more than 40% of college students took a remedial course in math, English or reading. This supports the findings that lack of prior preparation can result in poor academic performance in college, which was reflected in what the participants stated.

Online courses. When participants were asked about their classroom preferences on their questionnaires, 22% of the participants preferred 100% online, 33% disliked online 100%, and 44% preferred online but learned better in the classroom. The 33% of participants who disliked and the 44% who liked online but learned better in the classroom had at least one negative
experience with the online environment. Of the participants, 100% mentioned that they had a home computer. Therefore, access to a computer may not have been the problem. Rao (2009) noted several factors that contributed to digital disparities, which included age, gender, language proficiency, and income. Rao (2009) also mentioned that older people were slower to accommodate to technology. During the interviews, one of the participants noted that technology was not as prevalent when he was growing up. Therefore, he preferred taking classes on-campus. He acknowledged that technology did make information more accessible. However, he thought technology was a crutch for the instructors. He believed that instructors tended to teach less and rely on the use of technology more. Previous research on adult learners and technology concluded that adult learners who used technology in formal educational settings might prefer face-to-face instruction even though eLearning has its advantages (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010).

**Testing skills.** One participant mentioned not being good at test taking as a factor that hindered her success in the classroom. In the section struggling to adapt, one participant elaborated on how her test scores added to her struggles in the classroom. Sutton (2016) cited O’Keefe (1993) who affirmed that the skills of those who graduated decades before were far different from recent high school graduates. In addition, the adult learner’s ability to develop study habits, complete assignments, and pass exams could present serious challenges. Even though this participant struggled with her testing skills, she was able to persist with the help of online testing resources.

**Health issues.** Under the theme of overcoming obstacles, participants reflected on personal health issues and the health of family members. One participant revealed that she had to overcome several bouts of cancer while pursuing her degree. As a result of her chronic illness, she had to start and stop attending college for extended periods of time. Hill (2011) revealed that
self-directed learning was evident in chronic illness, which led to transformative learning. Hill (2011) cited Rager (2004) for the research on breast cancer and prostate cancer patients in self-directed learning. Rager’s (2004) research disclosed that women with a chronic illness were more empowered, connected better with others, and had a better view of their education. In addition, Rager identified that emotional support and dealing with an emotional disorder needed to be accomplished before learning could continue. Rager’s (2004) idea of women learning from their situations and searching for deeper meaning supported the participants’ motivation to persist. Hill (2011, as cited by Rager) duly noted that men with chronic illnesses were less likely to share their experiences. One of the male participants in this study mentioned being disabled and a military veteran. The participant was also reliant on a walker to get around. However, the participant never mentioned his condition as an obstacle. The one female participant who mentioned overcoming breast cancer believed that her journey was meant to be shared with others who may experience something similar. She was a true example of a survivor and a woman of perseverance.

**Family as an obstacle.** There were several obstacles that the participants mentioned throughout the study regarding family. One participant had the responsibility of caring for aging grandparents, which caused her to experience academic difficulty. The participant reported she was working a full-time job and trying to complete her school work at the same time. Previous research acknowledged that caring for family members could be a barrier that a minority adult learner could experience when attending college (Deggs, 2011). Research revealed that grandchildren who were caregivers were unable to engage in activities such as homework and outside activities because of the fear of their grandparent harming themselves (Ihara, Horio, & Tompkins, 2012).
In Chapter Four, in the subtheme overcoming obstacles, the participants also reflected on their decision to choose family instead of going to college following high school. One participant decided to marry her high school sweetheart despite having a college scholarship. Another participant went to college, but after learning his girlfriend was pregnant, he enlisted in the military to support his family. Adult learners viewed family responsibilities, as being a single parent, being a sole caretaker, and the unmet need for daycare as challenges (Campbell, 2005). One participant recalled not having support from her parents as a teenage mother, which made her decision to go to college unimportant to her family. Undereducated adults were more susceptible to negative influences from unsupportive family members, which often hindered their success (Terry, 2007). One participant encountered the obstacle of not having family support from her parents, but she later received the support she needed once she married and had a family of her own. Even though she did not have the initial external support from her parents, she had the internal desire to obtain her goal regardless of how her parents felt.

**Research Question Two**

The second research question in this study was, “What past educational experiences do undergraduate minority adult learners believe have affected their ability to adapt to college as adults?” This question allowed the participants to recall past educational experiences they encountered.

**Childhood labeling.** In Chapter Four, under struggling to adapt, one participant revealed that she was labeled with specific LD and emotional disabilities as a child, which affected her when attempting to adapt in college. Goldstein, Naglieri, and DeVries (2011) noted that most of the research surrounding LD consisted of white males from middle-to-upper class families. Previous research confirms that studies examining the resilience of adult learners labeled as LD
have been quite limited (DeVries, 2011). Previous studies showed that successful adult learners with learning disabilities learned to adapt to life events, became goal setters, and established a solid support system (Goldstein, Naglieri, & DeVries, 2011). Kiln and Hudak (2014) interjected that the effect of labeling sought to view “students as human capital” (p. 263). Kiln and Hudak (2014) argue, “students—as future workers—must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively” (p. 263). Labeled students are seen as unimportant and, therefore, deemed as “inferior products” incapable of adding to the economy.

The one participant who mentioned being labeled understood at an early age that labeling had a negative connotation and did not believe she had the same educational opportunities to advance as other students. However, the education system, as she mentioned, led her to want to continue to prove that she could learn if given the opportunity. Knowles (1989) agreed that although adult learners may be motivated, they may also experience impediments. Childhood labeling could have led this participant to accept the negativity associated with having a learning disability, but she chose to use her disability as an opportunity to prove people wrong.

**Being unsure.** Participants had embarked on various paths prior to attending Centrism College. Yet, one participant actually admitted that being unsure affected her ability to adapt to college. As one of the youngest participants in the study, this participant attended several trade schools previously and had different interests before deciding to major in criminal justice. She admitted that she initially attended college because her peers were doing it. It wasn’t until she found value in understanding the law, which was heavily influenced by racially-driven events that intrigued her to gain greater knowledge. The participant compared her three black sons to Trayvon Martin, which was a high-profile murder case in Central Florida only miles away from the college. The outcome and verdict of the defendant in the trial raised concern for this
participant. Her once unsure and unclear path was made visible because of the outcry of the community and the concern for her children. This participant was able to find interest as a result of a tragic incident to guide her to what she was most passionate about. This is not always the case. Several participants attended multiple schools and because of the number of credits they received they were advised to declare a major of general studies so that they could graduate. One of the determinants for students leaving college during their first year was having too many credits without enough in a specific area to complete a degree (Madgett & Belanger, 2008). The authors stated that students who transferred from one school to another often left because they had too many classes to take to get their degree. Being unsure has several disadvantages, but the main two are having a number of credits but not becoming an expert in a single subject and the extensive use of financial aid funds. Financial aid issues were identified as one of the obstacles that adult learners faced when enrolling in college (Markowitz & Russell, 2006). Being unsure led students to take credits in different areas before deciding on a major.

Parenthood. Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently mentioned family and their children. Of the female participants in this study, five out of nine had children. These participants consistently described their responsibilities and the activities they were involved in concerning their children. Kenner and Wienerman (2011) believed adult learners had some form of success in their non-academic lives that could be replicated in their academic accomplishments. One participant mentioned her duties as a mother and finding balance when juggling various family tasks was part of her adapting as an adult learner. For this participant, being a parent taught her to be organized, which was a personal experience that helped her in the classroom. This was an interesting observation because one the obstacles the participants mentioned under the theme overcoming obstacles was the subtheme of family as an obstacle.
Yet, one participant made the connection that, as an adult learner, her role and responsibilities as a parent assisted her as a student in the classroom. Parenting consists of various responsibilities that require attention to details, deadlines, and commitment. Thus, it appears that parenting presents experiences applicable to college adaptation for adult learners.

**Professional experience.** One of the female participants reflected on her experience as a former human services professional as a non-academic experience that helped her as an adult learner when she transitioned to a career as a correctional official. This participant related changing careers to changing learning environments. She had gone from taking all her classes online to taking courses on-campus in which she was an outsider who had to adjust. When experiencing career changes, this participant needed to learn how to adapt to different people and a different atmosphere. Although the nature of the careers she had was different, she was able to apply that same thinking when she changed from the online environment to the campus environment as Kenner and Wienerman (2011) suggested.

**Research Question Three**

The last research question used for this study incorporated the conceptual frameworks of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail’s geometric model. The third question this study addressed was: “What psychological needs are most important to undergraduate minority adult learners who experience academic difficulty?” Each participant was given a questionnaire that had two ranking questions to determine which needs were the most important to them and how they viewed themselves in relation to the institution. It was rather interesting that esteem was the least important need on the participants’ questionnaires, yet, during the interviews it was clear that esteem was actually very important.
**Love and belonging.** Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently stated that support was important. The participants discussed having the support from family, friends, and co-workers. Eight of the participants enjoyed taking classes with people they did not know. For these participants, it seemed that not knowing their classmates made the learning environment more robust. One participant mentioned being able to learn from others. Another participant discussed being able to see a person grow from not wanting to speak in class to wanting to speak and doing well. Another participant added that she received help from classmates in subjects in which she struggled. Generally, the participants believed that a sense of belonging was needed in the classroom to develop inclusion and social integration. Tinto (2012) mentioned that social integration consisted of both academic and social involvement while overlapping one another simultaneously.

Interactions with faculty and staff were also mentioned by the participants. One participant said she loved the college and that the people were friendly. Another participant added the staff members were helpful and knowledgeable. Previous research has shown that students who were engaged in a learning environment were more likely to persist than those who experienced loneliness or a lack of involvement (Tinto, 2012).

Social factors played a major role in both the academic and personal lives of these participants. The majority of the participants experienced having a social connection with classmates, faculty, and staff. Some of the participants mentioned that classmates, faculty, and staff assisted them when they had challenges and helped to address the weaknesses they had. Swail et al. (2008) believed that the wholeness of the student was presented through social factors to which they were exposed. Social factors such as family and culture influenced a student’s worldview.
**Self-actualization.** The participants seemed to simultaneously address these needs at different times in their lives. For one participant, it was clear that overcoming cancer gave her a new outlook on life. In the theme entitled motivation to persist: balancing life, self-actualization occurred when the participant realized that she needed to change her learning environment if she wanted to persist. Another participant took the advice of his academic advisor to complete one course at a time. These self-actualizing moments occurred in conjunction with the participants being motivated intrinsically and extrinsically.

Intrinsically, the participants showed that they were motivated to persist after being placed on probation, suspension, and dismissal by finding ways to improve academically. Two of the participants were dismissed from the college for three years, which means they had three years to decide how important the education was. One participant was motivated because she wanted a better career and the other participant wanted to transfer to a new institution. Motivation has been described as an inner behavior that guides one’s decisions (Huitt, 2011). Extrinsic motivation was exhibited by some participants who chose to change their learning environments to avoid continual declines in their GPA. Ryan and Deci (2000) affirmed that extrinsic motivation leads a person to make a choice based on circumstance. Even though the participants experienced academic difficulty, they did not let that stop them from reaching their goals. At the time of the interview, all the participants had been reinstated to good academic standing.

**Security.** One male participant mentioned not being able to take courses he needed for his degree as he continued. This participant was concerned with the lack of junior and senior level courses that the campus offered. As a result, he was sometimes encouraged to take online courses, which he did not enjoy because online learning was not a secure and familiar learning
environment to which he was accustomed. Familiarity and comfortability add to students’ feelings of safety and security in the learning environment (Milheim, 2012). With respect to security, the majority of the female participants were more concerned with their family, and in some cases, they would rather not take courses if there was a conflict with family or outside activities. At least two participants openly stated they were unable to focus on school because of family-related reasons. Financial issues of security were mentioned by two participants. One participant struggled with the long-term idea of paying back her student loans. Another participant reluctantly stated financial issues caused her to do poorly in the classroom. Having stability included having a space in which the participants felt safe and free to learn. When the learning environment and outside activities were aligned, safety and security were achieved by the participants.

**Esteem.** Based on the statements provided by previous research from Goebel and Brown (1981), participants in this study ranked esteem as the least important need. However, throughout the interviews, the participants mentioned wanting to make their families proud of them for their accomplishments. At least three of the nine the participants were inspired to continue their degree because of their children.

Each of the participants in this study struggled with academic difficulty, which could have affected their esteem. Of the participants in this study, 66% experienced probation only, 11% were suspended only, and 22% experienced probation, suspension, and dismissal while attending Centrism College. Yet, they did not allow their academic status to overshadow their desire to continue their degree. One participant mentioned acquiring a tutor in the area of math, and another participant mentioned using online resources, which were reflective of building
one’s esteem. Manzoor, Ahmed, and Gill (2015) stated that behaviorism theory believed that what helped to improve one’s motivation also helped to build esteem.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was used to determine what psychological needs minority adult learners perceived as most important as they persisted after experiencing academic difficulty. Identifying the needs that assisted these participants was critical to dispelling deficit thinking that adult learners who failed did so because they were lazy and wanted to receive financial aid. This study acknowledged that the contributing factors of poor academic performance could be both internal, external, and sometimes beyond the student’s control. These participants overcame obstacles with family, online courses, lack of preparation, childhood labeling, among other things to continue to persist and rise above their probation, suspension, or academic dismissal statuses. Several participants from this study have since graduated with a degree or continued their educational journey. When analyzing the difference between genders, the male participants ranked family as most important, and the female participants collectively ranked self-actualization as most important. This was rather interesting since most of the female participants were mothers, and they often mentioned being active in their children’s lives. Tietze and Shakeshaft (1982) criticized Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as being too masculine. In their critique, they pointed out that Maslow used different language when describing self-actualization for males and females. The authors believed Maslow’s description of the self-actualizing female was androcentric in nature. Tietze and Shakeshaft (1982) accused Maslow of generalizing females as “ideal mother[s]” who were accepting of the female roles and responsibilities. The female participants in this study defied the generalization of women as only mothers. One participant was more concerned with gaining knowledge for herself rather than obtaining a new
job or career. Respectively, another participant did decide to continue her degree so that she could advance her career. For Maslow to assume that motherhood was the pinnacle of female self-actualization only limited women and somewhat devalued the potential of persisting female students. This study disconfirmed Maslow’s ideology as related to Tietze and Shakeshaft’s criticism because the female participants were continuing to pursue their education while helping raise their children with the help of other family and friends.

In general, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs helped to place value on those areas with which undergraduate minority adults generally were most concerned. The study showed that adult learners have the need to build up their esteem, what to be secure in their educational space, they want to belong, and they want to self-actualize. The participants in this study wanted the approval of their family and friends, they wanted to make others proud of their accomplishments, and they were unwilling to let their past poor academic performance hinder their future success. This data implied that minority adult learners need to be actively engaged when pursuing their degree. From the tone of the participants, the relationship that they had with their academic advisors or faculty members was that relationship that made the difference in whether they left or returned to the institution following their period of academic difficulty.

**Swail’s Geometric Model**

Swail’s geometric model was used to understand how the participants perceived themselves in relation to cognitive, social, and institutional factors. The participants in this study demonstrated that their experiences aligned with Swail’s geometric model. Cognitively, the participants mentioned technology adaptability, time management, study skills, and learning skills. The use of the online classroom environment was cited on numerous occasions by the participants as both positive and negative. Socially, the participants demonstrated coping skills
with balancing family, work, and school. Several of the participants enjoyed the college and the resources the college provided. The resources that the participants mentioned were consistent with the areas Swail et al. (2003) identified, which were financial aid, student services, and academic services.

Through the lens of Swail’s geometric model, the data revealed the importance of developing a faculty/student relationship to help in retaining minority adult learners. The reason why some of the participants did not favor online courses was the lack of faculty/student interaction. Therefore, if the faculty members expressed concern for their students in the classroom by making recommendations for them to meet with their advisor or referring them to different resources the adult learners could better develop their cognitive and social factors while the institution would be taking a vested interest in the retention process of the current adult learners. If Centrism College leaders developed directives for faculty to learn about their students and fully engage with them, adult learners might tell other adult learners about the faculty interaction they experienced. The idea of word of mouth marketing could definitely prove to be an essential element to the retention process.

**Implications**

This study utilized the conceptual frameworks of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Swail’s geometric model. These conceptual frameworks provided a lens to examine the lived experiences of minority adult learners who have experienced academic difficulty but continued to persist in college. The purpose was to identify the factors that motivate undergraduate minority adult learners to persist after a period of academic difficulty and investigate the relationship between their motivation and poor academic performance while linking their needs to the institution’s role in the retention process. The results of this study provided
recommendations for retention efforts of adult learners at the site in which the study took place. Wyatt (2011) stated that institutions needed to develop programs and events that would appeal to nontraditional students and include their families. The majority of the participants in this study were unemployed, therefore, creating job fairs that included resume writing workshops could be beneficial. The study revealed that retention could be increased by incorporating additional resources and best practices to assist adult learners’ at-risk of academic difficulty. If academic advisors were more intentional in their interactions with the adult learners, they could assist the student early on before they were suspended and dismissed. When meeting with those adult learners who mention family challenges, financial obstacles, or health issues, it could be helpful for the advisor to be able to color code or send special alerts to the student informing him or her of certain policy deadlines. Also, placing reminders on the student’s account to check on them personally would help to establish a better advisor/student relationship.

Brown (2004) stated that transformative learning theory suggests a new lens through which adult learners increased their awareness of themselves as learners. This awareness could increase the adult learner’s ability to see education in a new light and have more “skin in the game” (as cited by Hillside, 2016). More importantly, the administration, community, and stakeholders alike must take responsibility for the role they played in the lives of the adult learners they educated. Shields’ (2012) tenet of deficit thinking resonated throughout this study to dispel the negativity surrounding those adult learners who experienced academic difficulty. The study showed that not every adult learner who was placed on probation, suspension, or dismissal could be categorized as lazy or seeking financial gain through the use of financial aid funds. Shields (2012) viewed this thought process as a way to blame the student for their negligence and poor decisions when, in fact, the institution’s policy, staff, and interactions could
have contributed to the deficiency that adult learners could face. Prescott and Simpson (2004) pointed out that confusion and clutter could make information difficult to disseminate, thus, frustrating the student. If institutional leaders decided to reject deficit thinking and respect the differences, and the challenges adult learners face, they could ultimately improve the outcome of those who could otherwise experience academic difficulty (Shields, 2012). Just as Swift (1987) suggested, Centrism College should reevaluate its policies and procedures to make sure they are conducive to today’s adult learners. Online courses were an area that received mixed responses; most of the participants liked online but did not do well, and a majority did not like at all. This is an area that should be reconstructed to see if a happy medium could be identified. Yet, first leaders must realize that deficit thinking exists (Shields, 2012).

Lastly, the study revealed community-based learning as a vital part of adult learners strengthening their skills, understanding and civic responsibilities (Brown, 2004). The participants in this study may help the institution create more opportunities for adult learners to build communities. This could be established by the use of a student ambassador program in which adult learners facilitate opportunities for community involvement, assist with student concerns, and provide leadership to Centrism College. Instead of developing communities that exclude their families the institution could create a community that included them as Tierney (1999) suggested. Since the majority of the participants in this study had children, incorporating family responsibilities could foster a greater support system. Moreover, the experiences of these participants may also give the institution a better understanding of what minority adult learners face and not generalize all adult learners that experience academic difficulty.
Recommendations for Action

The findings in this research study affirmed that minority adult learners preferred learning environments that promoted social and cognitive inclusion. Faculty and staff should work to create learning environments that have a family-like atmosphere that fosters social integration and support to all students. Research has shown that adult learners understand the importance of developing new social, family-like structures (Robson-Funk et al., 2000). This may explain why the participants preferred taking classes with people they did not know so that they could establish a new community and gain more support in the classroom. Incorporating more hybrid courses would expose the adult learners to face-to-face and technology-based instruction so they could feel more comfortable with the online environment. Swail et al. (2003) stressed that less supportive learning environments resulted in lower esteem. Some participants in the study experienced learning from others when they struggled in the classroom, and other participants mentioned being supportive of others. Most of the participants had a good experience with faculty and staff, but one participant did mention that front office staff should be trained not to use offensive or demeaning language. An inclusive environment is needed for the success of adult learners since it is an adult learner environment. This finding is supported by the idea of creating a space to develop interactions (Zittoun, 2008). Tierney (1999) supported the idea that family is imperative to student success. Braxton and Hirschy (2011) agreed that psychological support and social affluence helps to determine the persistence of student. Tinto (2012) suggested that social integration is extremely important to the academic and social aspects of adult learners’ persistence.

Centrism College leaders will need to make sure that academic services are established to address the needs of adult learners. Although some of the participants stated they knew of
tutoring services, not all of the participants were aware of the tutoring resources available.

Prescott and Simpson (2004) identified safety and security needs to include having information displayed clearly, which means tutoring availability should be more visible to all adult learners. Previous research has shown that not having a clear understanding of what resources are available frustrates and overwhelms adult learners (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). Those participants in the study who utilized the academic services had a better relationship with faculty and staff. One participant mentioned attending class early and leaving class later to get extra tutoring in math. Some participants discussed having a relationship with their academic advisor, which helped them get on track. The researcher recommended the academic advisors at Centrism College take an active role in students’ educational success by staying in contact with advisees and addressing issues as they occur. Gordon et al. (2008) believed academic advising was a centralized process from enrollment to departure. For those participants who established a relationship with an academic advisor, they were able to get additional online resources that may not have been readily available like the study guides one participant mentioned. In addition, some participants received support from their advisor that motived them to persist. One participant said, “She [academic advisor] was like, ‘Well, [Alex], if you look at it, you’ve got one more class to do.’ [She] showed me the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Last, the institution should consider the cognitive abilities of minority adult learners. The participants in this study were 30 years old or older. Although all the participants had prior college experience, they each stated they were not prepared to attend college. Furthermore, most of the participants graduated from high school 10 years prior to attending the institution. Therefore, the adult learner’s ability to adapt to the classroom may have been somewhat inferior to that of recent high school graduates. More consideration should be given to adult learners as
they attempt to balance work, family, outside activities, and their school work. Kenner and Wienerman (2011) concluded that adult learners learn better when they see the value in what they are learning and can apply it to their lives. Cognitively, adult learners have more life experiences than traditional-aged students along with greater fears and prejudices that they will need to overcome (Swail et al., 2003). Currently, Centrism College does not require entrance exams such as ACT or SAT for admission. Therefore, a comprehensive retention plan should be designed to address the cognitive, social, and institutional needs of minority adult learners. Since not all adult learners have the same backgrounds, an entrance assessment could be used to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the adult learners. Data could be organized and used to better forecast the adult learners’ likelihood of succeeding in the classroom based on several factors identified in this study. Those factors could be financial aid awareness, math, English and writing competency, family structure/support, educational goals, and future ambitions, which could have implications on the adult learner’s success. By having data to understand where the adult learner was and his or her end goals, faculty and staff would have a better understanding of how to help individual students. This would help to eliminate some of the generalizations placed on adult learners and college students in general. Swail et al. (2008) stated:

institutions need to know about their students—on an individual basis—if they want to truly provide the necessary resources to support their educational and future success. Anything else is simply tinkering at the margins and not taking student retention seriously. (p. 17)

Socially, academic advisors should assist in making sure that adult learners have a clear understanding of what degree is best for them. Advisors play an intricate role in making adult learners feel a part of the institution. Developing relationships with adult learners prior to them
experiencing academic difficulty will be key in decreasing the number of adult learners who experience probation, since probation is the first step. Scale (1960) suggested the need to improve academic services to include more comprehension of tutoring, academic advising, and financial aid.

The institution should reevaluate the course selections and degree offerings to ensure they align with the needs of the students. Some participants were dissatisfied with the course availability; this is an area that the institution should address. Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) stated that dissatisfied students are not motivated to persist and do not experience academic fit. If the institution wants to retain its adult learners and increase its adult learner population, student satisfaction is key. Previous research showed that one’s institutional experience affected whether he or she would be retained or complete a degree (Wilson, 2005).

The participants in this study made the following recommendations for the institution:

- Implement a writing lab that addresses plagiarism so that adult learners will know what is and what is not considered plagiarism.
- Provide tutoring to all students, rather than limiting it to those students who are registered for classes on-campus. Tutoring should be available for all student regardless of their preference in learning environments.
- Publicize resources including tutoring, time management techniques, and study guides and make them readily available to all students needing additional assistance.
- Make available more junior and senior level courses on-campus, so those who prefer the on-campus environment are not forced to take classes online and risk failure.
• Last, campus staff should be trained to provide what is considered good customer service. Staff should learn to listen to the needs of the students before assuming that they fully understand what the student is saying.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the findings from this research study, the following recommendations for future research have been made:

• There were only seven female participants in this study. The researcher recommended a new study should be conducted to show the evolution of minority adult women in higher education using Charol Shakeshaft’s criticism of androcentric bias of Maslow’s theory.

• Further research should be conducted comparing adult learners who persist with academic difficulty and those who have not experienced academic difficulty to test if the factors of persistence are the same.

• Adult learners by definition also include traditional-aged students with children. Further research should be conducted to gather the lived experiences of adult learners under 25 years old to understand what factors could affect their persistence early in their educational careers.

• Since the study was conducted at one of 36 campuses, a quantitative study should be conducted comparing adult learners at multiple campuses who have experienced academic difficulty and how demographic and institutional factors affect their persistence.

• Adult learners with learning disabilities is not a topic often mentioned in higher education. Further research that examines the diagnosed learning disabilities of adult learners pursuing their post-secondary degree to measure their abilities to adapt.
Likewise, future research should be conducted to identify how undiagnosed learning disabilities affect adult learners later in life.

Since the participants in this study did not disclose much about the negative aspects of their life, a case study should be conducted with each of the participants to understand any hidden barriers that may have contributed to their positive outlook on life.

A psychological study could help to determine the motivation and what has aided struggling adults in higher education to rise above their circumstances and graduate with a college degree.

Chronic illness was mentioned by a female participant. Previous research suggested that women with chronic illness were more forthcoming about their illness than men were. Future research should be conducted to address how chronic illness affects the motivation of adult learners in post-secondary education.

The participants in this study were selected because they had a negative experience of academic difficulty. Surprisingly, the participants were extremely positive about their experiences. More research is needed to depict the academic journeys of adult learners that experience academic difficulty to understand their optimism and persistence.

Conclusion

The literature was very limited on the optimism of adult learners who experienced academic difficulty. Yet, most of the participants were positive when describing their experiences and were reluctant to expound on their negative experiences. It is possible that at least one of the participants was homeless while he or she attended college and another had lost his or her job, but none of the participants mentioned that. When asked to further explain negative instances quite a few participants were hesitant to do so. The purpose of this study was
to gather the lived experiences of minority adult learners who experienced academic difficulty. The conceptual frameworks were used to identify the needs of minority adult learners along with their cognitive, social, and institutional relationships.

Four themes were identified from this study: (a) overcoming obstacles, (b) struggling to adapt, (c) motivation to persist: balancing life, and (d) recommendations to Centrism College. The subthemes provided depth to the study and gave a voice to those minority adult learners who experienced academic difficulty. For institutions to retain their most valuable assets, it will be important for them to understand the complex lives that adult learners live. This study confirmed that support is essential to the persistence of adult learners. This study disconfirmed that there should be a figurative suicide of one’s culture as Tinto (2012) recommended. In the literature, Tinto (2012) was cited for his theory that one should reject his or her culture and surroundings to be successful in college. Although Tinto has contributed to higher education, specifically the area of retention, his studies are not comprehensive of minorities or adult learners. Therefore, this study affirmed Tierney’s (1999) idea that cultural competency influenced the understanding that family and support were essential to student success of minority adult learners was reflective of true retention and should not be separated. This study also affirmed that minority adult learners learn best when all three factors are equal in respect to their education. The cognitive, social, and institutional factors aid their persistence along with their confidence. The participants in the study had inspirational stories that were motivating and vividly depicted their perceived experiences.
References


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Commission for Adult Learners. (2015, August 1.) Retrieved from http://cal.psu.edu/


doi:10.1177/0192513X12444858


http://doi.org/10.2307/2668211


Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Students

Greetings Student!

I hope this email finds you well. You are receiving this email because you have been selected as a potential candidate for my research study. Currently, I am a doctoral student at University of New England working on my dissertation in educational leadership with an emphasis in adult learner education.

I am seeking participants who are willing to provide feedback regarding their educational experiences here at the college, personal goals, hardships and ways that the college could better help students who experience probation, suspension or dismissal. If you agree to participate, please let me know when you are available during the early fall session to schedule your interview.

During your interview, you will be given a questionnaire and asked a series of questions. The interviews will be between 60 minutes. All participants will be provided a consent form and all information will be confidential. Your name will not be disclosed; all participants will be given pseudonyms. Your participation in this study is 100% voluntary and will have no effect on your grades, interaction with the researcher or the college.

If you are interested please respond, YES, I would like to participate or NO, I would not like to participate. If you say YES, then we will schedule your interview date, and time.

Thank you for your time.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Dianna R. Montfort
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix B

Consent for Participation in Research

Project Title: The Factors Affecting Undergraduate Retention Among Minority Adult Learners

Principal Investigator(s): Dianna R. Montfort, student, University of New England, dmontfort@une.edu. Joanne Cooper, Ph. D., faculty advisor, University of New England, jcooper5@une.edu

Introduction:
- Please thoroughly read the consent form, you may also request that the form is read to you. This form outlines the purpose of this research study, and gives your consent to voluntarily participate in the study.
- You are free to ask any questions you have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. Please take your time before deciding to participate; note that at any time you can decide not to participate, omit, and revise your responses during the project. Your participation is 100% voluntary and will have no effect on your grades, interaction with the researcher or the college.

Why is this study being done?
- The purpose of the study is to understand what minority adult learners encounter when placed on probation, suspension and dismissal personally, professionally and academically.

Who will be in this study?
- Participants in this study will be:
  o Minority adult learners who are at least 25 years of age
  o Student attending “Centrism College”
  o Those that have been placed on probation, suspension and/or dismissal.
  o Completed at least 12 credit with the college
- At least nine participants will be involved with this study.

What will I be asked to do?
- Participants will be asked to:
  o Complete a questionnaire to gather demographic information.
  o Participate in a 60-minute interview and answer the questions asked by the researcher open and honestly.
    - Questions asked during the interview will help me understand what factors affecting minority adult learner retention.
    - And how your experiences affect your discussion to persist.
  o Interviews will be conducted starting in September, 2016
- Interviews will be recorded and notes will also be taken for accuracy and clarity.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
- There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study.
What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?
- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. Your participation may benefit the college, advisors, and other students who may have experienced academic difficulty.

What will it cost me?
- There are no costs to you associated with this study.

How will my privacy be protected?
- I will follow the same FERPA privacy regulations like any other advising session.
- The results from my study will be shared with you, the other participants in this study, my dissertation committee, editors, and anyone interested in reading these results.
- Personal information will not be disclosed when reporting the results of my study.

How will my data be kept confidential?
- All data collected for this study will be kept on a security protected flash drive and any hand notes will be locked in a file. Interviews will be recorded and locked at my home.
  - Data will be password protected.
  - Your personal information such as name, and student id will not be used for this study.
  - A pseudonym will be used and all data will be coded.
  - Your true identity will not be shared.
- The college(s) in which this study takes place will not be directly mentioned in this study.
- Please note that regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only I will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during this project.
- Rev.com will be consulted to transcribe your interview; other than myself they will be the only other person(s) that hear your voice.
  - Interview data will be destroyed following the completion of the study.
- The results from the study will be shared with you, the participants selected for the study, my dissertation committee, editors, transcriptionists, and key stakeholders at the College with a “legitimate” interest in the results.

What are my rights as a research participant?
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relationship with the College, your professors or interactions with the staff.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, and for any reason.
What other options do I have?
- You may choose not to participate; participation is 100% voluntary.

Whom may I contact with questions?
- The researcher is Dianna R. Montfort and the faculty is Joanne Cooper, Ph. D. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact me via email at drmontfort@ccis.edu or Joanne Cooper, Ph. D. at 207-221-4960, jcooper5@une.edu.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?
- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant’s Statement
I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant’s signature or
Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

Researcher’s Statement
The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher’s signature

Date

Dianna R. Montfort
Printed name
Appendix C

Semi-structured Interviews

Cognitive Information
1. What made you select your particular major and why?
2. How long did you wait to go to college after completing high school? (How prepared were you prior to coming to college? Did you have tutoring, prior college experiences etc…?)
3. What made you first decide to go to college?

Background information
4. Tell me a little about your background? (Where you’re from, where you’ve lived, the kind of environment, your family structure, past work experiences)
5. Tell me about your educational background starting as far back as you can remember.
6. Describe any difficult situations you experienced while pursuing your degree?
7. How do you believe your past educational experiences impacted your ability to adapt in college as an adult?

Collegiate academic experience
8. Tell me about your experiences with the faculty and staff at this college? (Have you had any challenges? Were faculty and staff able to help you?)
9. What type of changes occurred that helped you bring your GPA up?
10. What is the most important reason why you are getting your degree?

Social experience
11. What type of support have you gotten from those that know you are in college?
12. Who inspired you to continue pursuing your degree?
13. What activities outside of school are most important to you?
14. How would you describe the best learning environment for you?
15. Do you like taking courses with people you know or do you prefer taking courses with people you do not know and why?
16. Select one of the following statements best describes you:
   a. I feel cognitively strong, socially strong and I like the institution. (PP)
   b. I feel cognitively strong, but socially weak. (CSSW)
   c. I feel socially strong, but cognitively weak. (SSCW)
d. I feel socially and cognitively strong and I neither like nor dislike the institution.
   (SSCS)

17. Rank the order of the following statements (adapted from Goebel & Brown, 1981)
   a. I like doing things which make other people look up to me. (Esteem)
   b. I like doing things with my friends and family. (Love)
   c. I like doing things which fill my physical needs. (Physiological)
   d. I like doing things which let me develop my talents or interests. (Self-actualization)
   e. I like doing things which are planned ahead. (Security)

**Institutional views**

18. What recommendations would you make to the college based on your experience?
19. What kind of services could have helped you before you were placed on probation, suspension or dismissal?
20. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience, interaction with the college or anything I did not ask you?
Appendix D

Pre-interview Questionnaire

Complete the questionnaire below prior to your interview. This information is 100% confidential. Your responses will not be used to identify you individually. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Please respond appropriate responses honestly.

Demographics questionnaire
1. **What race/ethnicity do you consider yourself?** Black/African American; Hispanic; Asian; Alaskan/ Pacific Islander, Indian; Multi-racial; Other_________________________
2. **Do you have a high school diploma, alternative completion or GED?**
3. **What is your age?** __________________________________________________________
4. **Do you have a personal computer at home?** Yes or No
5. **What is your family household income?** under-10,000; 10,001-20,999; 30,000-49,999; 50,000-69,000; 70,000-89,999; 90,000-199,999; 200,000 or more
6. **How many people live in your household?** Less than 3; 3-5 people; 5-7 people; 7-10 people more than 10 people
7. **How many children live with you under 18?** 0 children; 1-2 children; 3-4 children; 5-6 children; more than 6
8. **As of today, what is your marital status?** Married; Divorced; Separated; Single; Other____________________________________________________________
9. **Are you employed** full-time; part-time; not currently employed?
10. **Are you a:** freshmen; sophomore; junior; senior; alumni
11. **What degree(s) are you currently?** Associate’s Degree; Bachelor’s Degree or Both
12. **What is your current major?** Criminal Justice; Human Services; General Studies;
    Psychology; Sociology; Business Administration; Other_____________________

13. **Do you prefer taking classes** on-campus or online or both?

14. **How often do you come on-campus and utilize the resource lab, computer lab or**
    **Academic Advising Services?** Daily; Regularly 8-12 times per week; Often 5-7 times per week;
    Sometimes 1-4 times per week; Never-0

15. **How many schools did you previously attend?** 0-I’ve never attended another college; 1
    other college; 1-2 different colleges; 3 or more different colleges

16. **Are you currently a: full-time student** (2 classes per session), **part-time** (1 class per
    session), **or less than half-time student** (1 class per semester)?

17. **How do you pay for class?** Circle all that apply Pell Grant; Federal Loans; Tuition Assistance;
    Tuition Reimbursement; Pay out of pocket; Other________________________

18. **What departments/activities/resources are most important to you in college?** Circle all
    **that apply:** Student Affairs; Student Disabilities, Financial Aid, Student organizations;
    Academic Advising; Tutoring Services; computer labs; library; Career Services; Counseling
    Services; Writing Center; Student Government Association;
    Other____________________________________________________________________
# Appendix E

## Participant Demographics Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Code</th>
<th>Dominican</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>People in household</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th># of colleges previously attended</th>
<th>Class preference</th>
<th>Academic Difficulty Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3-5 people no children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>All &amp; BA</td>
<td>Criminal Justice-BSH</td>
<td>1-2 schools</td>
<td>On-campus and online</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3-5 people no children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>employed</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>1 school</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Men Pat</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Less than 3, no children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>All &amp; BA</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>1-2 diff</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Peyton</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Less than 3, 1-2 children</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
<td>1 school</td>
<td>On-campus and online</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dominique</td>
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<td>3-5 people, 1-2 children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>employed</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>General Studies</td>
<td>3-4 more diff</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mia Pierre</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3-5 people no children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>3-4 more diff</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Priscilla</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3-5 people, 3-4 children</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>All &amp; BA</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>1-2 diff</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Probation</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Allison</td>
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<td>3-5 people, 1-2 children</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>employed</td>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>1-2 diff</td>
<td>On-campus and online</td>
<td>Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dawson</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Less than 5, 0 children</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>employed</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>On-campus and online</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL N=9

---

- **Average:** 7 participants were female; 2 participants were male
- One participant had 0 children; 2 participants had 3-5 people including adult children; 2 participants had children under 10 but their adult children could include their adult children
- **Participants:** attended at least 1 school; 6 participants were only graduated, 1 participant was suspended after 1 year, 2 participants were dismissed after 3 years

---

Source: Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012
Appendix F
Interview Script

Hello, Welcome!

Please have a seat. I’m Dianna Montfort and I will be conducting the interviews for the study.

Thank you for agreeing to participate.

**Read the confidentiality to the participant. Give participant the consent form to read along.**

**Ask:** Do you agree to participate? If so, please sign the statement. If not, thank you for your time.

Before we get started I have a questionnaire for you to complete. I will give about 10 minutes to answer each question. I will be back once the timer rings. **interviewer exits the room living the participant alone to complete the questionnaire**

After the participant completes the questionnaire, give instructions

**Ask** Do you have any questions before we get started?

**Conduct interview**

Once complete, asked participants if they have any questions. Let them know follow-up is forthcoming once transcription is completed. The researcher let the participants know that they will be contacted if they wished to review their responses, amend or omit the data.

At the end of the interview I will let you know once your interview has been transcribed you will be able to review your statements and make changes as needed.
Appendix G

Variations on Model Stability

A. The Perfect Polygon. The three forces exert essentially the same presence or level of force, such that the cognitive and social attributes of the student are supported equally by the institution.

B. Socially Strong/Academically Weak. In this scenario, the student has weak cognitive/academic skills but very strong social skills. The institution must match the academic needs of the student to achieve equilibrium.

C. Cognitively Strong/Socially Weak. The student has very strong cognitive/academic skills but is low on the social scale. Thus, the institution must provide social stimulation and situations to integrate the student into the campus community.

D. Socially and Cognitively Strong. This student is gifted in academics and social skills. In some ways, the institution just needs to “be there,” and not get in the way. Only a catastrophic event will push this student off the completion track.

Appendix H

Letter of Consent-Department of Student Success

09/13/2016

Columbia College
1001 Rogers St.
Columbia, MO 65216

To Whom It May Concern:

Dianna Montfort applied for and received permission to pursue her dissertation research from the Columbia College Protection of Human Subjects Committee (PHS). This permission allows her to access reports for purposes outside the scope of her employment, specifically to identify participants for the research approved by the PHS committee.

Sincerely,

Nathan B. Miller, Ph.D.
Senior Director, Department of Student Success
Appendix I

Letter of Consent-Orlando Campus

Columbia College
1001 Rogers Street
Columbia, MO 65216
(573) 875-8700
www.ccis.edu

September 12, 2016

University of New England
Institutional Review Board

RE: Letter of consent

Greetings,

As per my signature below, Dianna Montfort who is pursuing her doctorate degree, has been granted permission to research our students here at the Orlando Campus. This includes demographic information, internal reports, statistical reports, and my personal communication with her. Her approval from the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, grants her the use of data beyond normalcy for the purpose of her research study.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Alan Hilliard
Southeast Regional Director &
Director @ Columbia College - Orlando
(407) 293-9911 - PH
(407) 293-8530 - Fax
ahilliard@ccis.edu
http://www.ccis.edu/orlando
Serving Central Florida for over 35 years
Appendix J

Letter of Consent-Columbia College Protection of Human Subjects Committee

Hello Dianna,

The Protection of Human Subjects Committee has reviewed your proposal. We have determined that the study presents no harm to participants. You may begin data collection at your convenience. Please be mindful that your home institution, University of New England, will no doubt have its own process of reviewing proposals. Permission from both institutions is often required. Finally, although we deem the project safe for participants, we are not in a position to allocate resources to this project. You will have to reach out to the departments implicated and request their assistance. Best of luck.

Ahoo Tabatabai

....

Dr. Ahoo Tabatabai
Chair of Protection of Human Subjects Committee
Department of Psychology and Sociology
Columbia College
1001 Rogers Street
Columbia, MO 65216
atabatabai@ccis.edu
http://sites.cougars.ccis.edu/ahootabatabai/
## APPENDIX K

### Coding & Categorizing Using NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>NVivo coding using Nodes</strong></th>
<th><strong>NVivo Nodes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Phrases used</strong></th>
<th><strong>Swail’s Geometric Model Themes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Themes used</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commonly used words/variations</td>
<td>Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs</td>
<td>If I can do they can do!</td>
<td>Cognitive Factors</td>
<td>Overcoming obstacles</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I wasn’t prepared at all</td>
<td>• Time management</td>
<td>• Family as an obstacle</td>
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<td>Those that knew I was in school</td>
<td>• Learning from other students,</td>
<td>• Being Unsure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>encouraged me.</td>
<td>teaching other students</td>
<td>• Health issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I have to do this</td>
<td>Social Factors</td>
<td>Struggling to adapt</td>
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<td>Financial part is major</td>
<td>• Family</td>
<td>• I wasn’t prepared</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting new people, tutoring</td>
<td>• Religious beliefs</td>
<td>• Childhood labeling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professors taking time to tutor</td>
<td>Institutional Factors</td>
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<td>Self-actualization</td>
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<td>Course availability</td>
<td>• Lack of high school preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Lack preparation</em></td>
<td>Physiological</td>
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<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>• Online courses</td>
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<td><em>Support</em></td>
<td>Safe &amp; Security</td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Interaction</td>
<td>• Financial issues</td>
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<td><em>Intrinsic Motivation</em></td>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Testing skills</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Love &amp; Belonging</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Motivation to persist: balance</td>
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<td><em>Social network</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intrinsic motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Academic Advisor</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Change of learning environment</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Instructor help</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Extrinsic motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Community</em></td>
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<td>• Family as motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Time management</em></td>
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<td>• Building classroom community</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Helping/support</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Learning skills</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Struggling to adapt</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Finding balance</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Balancing life and school</em></td>
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<td>Recommendations to Centrism College</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Understanding the value in education</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Writing lab</td>
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<td><em>Personal goals</em></td>
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<td>• Tutoring</td>
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<td>• Course availability</td>
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<td>• Staff interactions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L

Coding of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in NVivo

[Diagram of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs with branches for Love & Belonging, Self Realization, Physiological, Ego, and Safety & Security, with specific coding categories such as Family, Faculty, Support, Motivation, etc.]