

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Floretta M. Bush for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on September 28, 2010.

Title: Meeting the Needs of Nontraditional College Students? Student Perspectives on Proprietary School Practices

Abstract approved:

Dr. Sam Stern

The purpose of this study was to understand, through nontraditional student perspectives, how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of moderately to highly nontraditional students. The study was undertaken for these reasons: (a) A large and growing number of higher education students are nontraditional, putting them at higher risk of not reaching their educational goals; (b) proprietary schools represent a growing segment of higher education that is experiencing documented success with student outcomes; and (c) given increasing accountability expectations, community colleges may be able to learn from proprietary school successes.

The research design used an interpretive social science philosophical approach and the method of hermeneutic phenomenology. Six students from one proprietary school were interviewed in order to understand: (a) what meanings they ascribed to the term, “college success,” (b) what school practices they found to be most relevant to that success, and (c) how they felt these practices contributed to their success. Data emerging from the interviews were analyzed to show how participants’ nontraditional characteristics informed their meanings of college success and how the proprietary school practices were related by participants to those meanings.

Career Tech practices that were reported to contribute to participant success were career services and admissions, knowledgeable and helpful instructors, and informational meetings. The analysis of participant descriptions pointed to a complex, evolving student population who view college as a personal process and require the connectivity and

continuity that a relationship with the institution can provide. The following are among the seven insights drawn from the study:

- Participants held personal, as well as practical, meanings of college success.
- Having a knowledgeable instructor who applied explicit teaching methods was important to participants.
- Practices considered most relevant to participants were highly integrated into the college routine.

Given these insights and related research, the study offered implications for community college practitioners tasked with facilitating the success of nontraditional students, including the need to look beyond statistics to take students' characteristics and meanings of college success into account when setting practice. Doing so may not only address what is important to students, but may positively impact traditionally measured outputs such as retention and graduation.

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Meeting the Needs of Nontraditional College Students?
Student Perspectives on Proprietary School Practices

by
Floretta M. Bush

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Floretta M. Bush, Author

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This dissertation is dedicated to my late parents—to Robert, who helped me understand that a little learning can be a dangerous thing, and Flora, who taught me that whatever doesn’t kill me will make me stronger.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH FOCUS AND SIGNIFICANCE	1
Research Purpose and Questions	3
Key Concepts	4
Proprietary Schools.....	4
Moderately to Highly Nontraditional Students.....	5
Student Success.....	6
Significance.....	7
Nontraditional College Students: A Majority at Risk.....	7
Nontraditional Student Success in Proprietary Schools.....	8
Nontraditional Students and Community College Accountability	9
Summary of Research Focus and Significance.....	10
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	11
Approach to Review of the Literature	11
Organization of Review of the Literature	12
Nontraditional College Students	13
Defining Nontraditional Students	13
Nontraditional Students as Defined by the Research.....	14
NCES Criteria for Nontraditional Students	15
The Complexity of Nontraditional Students	17
Summary	19
Enrollment Patterns of Nontraditional Students	19
The Nontraditional Student on Campus.....	19
Nontraditional Students at Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools.....	22
Summary	25
Risks Associated with Being a Nontraditional Student	25
Persistence and Attainment.....	25
Relationship Between Nontraditional Traits and Persistence and Attainment.....	27
Summary	28
Needs of Nontraditional Students	28
Summary	30
Proprietary Schools.....	31
Definition	31
Proprietary Schools and Community Colleges Compared	33
History.....	34

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Re-emergence	36
Growth	36
Reasons for Current Re-emergence	36
Response From the Community College Sector	37
Summary	39
Oversight	39
Summary	41
Student Success in Proprietary Schools	42
Outcomes	42
Practices	43
Student Services	44
Curriculum Programming	45
Mission as a Driver of Practices	46
Structure Versus Choice	46
Summary	47
Summary	47
Community College Accountability	47
The Stimuli for Accountability	48
The Need for Accountability	49
Challenges in Meeting Performance Measures	50
Accountability as an Opportunity for Improvement	52
Summary	53
Summary of Review of Literature	53
CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF STUDY	55
Philosophical Approach: Interpretive Social Science	55
Personal Disclosure	57
Research Method: Phenomenology	60
Research Procedures	61
Site Selection	62
Criteria	62
Procedures	63
Participant Selection	64
Criteria	64
Recruitment Procedures	65
Data Needs and Collection Techniques	68
Interview Procedures	69
Complementary Data Collection Techniques	71
Data Analysis	72

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Data.....	73
Strategies to Protect Human Subjects.....	74
Summary	75
CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS' MEANINGS OF COLLEGE SUCCESS.....	76
Profiles of Participants.....	77
Participant 1: Susan	78
Background.....	78
Meanings of Success.....	80
Participant 2: Christmas.....	82
Background.....	83
Meanings of Success.....	85
Participant 3: Juanita.....	88
Background.....	88
Meanings of Success.....	91
Participant 4: Violet.....	92
Background.....	93
Meanings of Success.....	95
Participant 5: Julie.....	97
Background.....	97
Meanings of Success.....	101
Participant 6: Kaitlyn	102
Background.....	103
Meanings of Success.....	107
Profile Summary	108
Research Question 1: The Meaning of College Success	108
Nontraditional Student Characteristics	108
Emergence of Student Themes	108
Categorization of Nontraditional Characteristics.....	111
Needs.....	111
Internal Influences	112
External Influences	113
Summary	113
Meanings of College Success	113
Development of Themes.....	114
Practical and Personal Themes	116
Connecting the Themes: Characteristics and Meanings	118
Characteristics' Impact on Practical Meanings.....	119
Characteristics' Impact on Personal Meanings.....	121
Summary	123
Chapter Summary	124

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 5: CAREER TECH PRACTICES AND STUDENT SUCCESS	125
Career Tech.....	125
The Medical Assisting Program.....	127
The Atmosphere.....	128
Research Question 2: Practices Relevant to Success	130
Student Services.....	130
Career Services	132
Admissions.....	135
First Encounters	135
Ongoing Relationship	138
Financial Aid.....	140
Orientation	142
Summary	143
Instruction	144
Instructor-dependent Practices.....	145
Knowledge and Helpfulness	146
Instruction That Suits Their Learning Style.....	148
Knowing What Is Expected	149
Institution-dependent Practices.....	150
Class Schedule	151
Classroom/Lab Comfort.....	152
Cohort Class Arrangement.....	153
Summary	153
Information	154
Summary	157
Research Question 3: How Practices Impact Success	157
Practices Impacting Student Success	158
Career Services	160
Admissions.....	162
Knowledgeable and Helpful Instructors	164
Contributions of Other Practices.....	167
A Sense of Community.....	169
Summary	170
Connecting Practices to Success.....	171
Summary	174
Chapter Summary	175
CHAPTER 6: EMERGING INSIGHTS.....	177
Student Characteristics and NCES Criteria	177

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Student Characteristics' Potential to Inform College Practices	180
The Personal Meanings of College Success	182
The Integration of College Practices.....	184
The Need for Explicitness in Instruction	186
Creating Relationships Through Ongoing Practices.....	188
The Changing Influence of College Practices	190
Summary of Insights	191
Implications for Practice	192
Nontraditional Students as Individuals	192
Personal Meanings of College Success.....	193
Importance of Relationships	194
Benefits of Integrated Practices	194
The Need for Explicitness.....	195
The Ever-Changing Horizons of Students	196
Summary	196
Implications for Future Study	197
Nontraditional Students	197
Practices	198
In Proprietary Schools.....	198
Throughout Higher Education	199
Summary	200
Chapter Summary	200
CHAPTER 7: FINAL THOUGHTS	202
REFERENCES	204
APPENDICES	213
Appendix A: List of Documents Reviewed	214
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	215
Appendix C: Research Applicant Information Form.....	218
Appendix D: Services/Practices Questionnaire	219

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Percentage of undergraduates with nontraditional characteristics: 1999-2000.....	20
2. Flow chart showing the process of establishing a relationship between participants' nontraditional characteristics and their meanings of college success	77

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Percentage of Students with Select NCES Traits Who Possess Other NCES Nontraditional Traits	18
2. Percentage of Students at Each Level of Nontraditionalism Possessing Each NCES Nontraditional Trait.....	21
3. Percentage of Undergraduates According to Student Status, by Institution Type	22
4. Percentage of Undergraduates with Each Nontraditional Characteristic, by Institution Type.....	24
5. Percentage of 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students According to Their Enrollment Continuity, by Nontraditional Status and Initial Degree Objective	26
6. Percentage Distribution of All 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students with a Reported Degree Objective According to Their Persistence and Attainment of Degree Objective by 1994 by Student Status	27
7. Participants by Demographic Characteristics.....	67
8. Participants by NCES Nontraditional Characteristics.....	68
9. Research Questions and Their Related Interview Questions	69
10. Composite Nontraditional Student Themes and Their Corresponding Individual Themes	110
11. Overall Meaning of Success Themes and Their Corresponding Individual Themes	115
12. Relationship Between Nontraditional Student Characteristics and College Success Themes	119
13. Participant Use of Career Tech Student Services.....	132
14. Importance of Career Tech Instructional Practices to Participants	145

LIST OF TABLES (Continued)

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
15. Methods Through Which Participants received Information From Career Tech.....	155
16. Career Tech Practices Discussed With Participants	158
17. Practices Contributing to Participant Success and the Facilitative Elements Within Each	160
18. Career Tech Practices Impacting Participants' Meanings of Success.....	172
19. Relationship Between NCES Criteria and Participant Characteristics.....	178

Meeting the Needs of Nontraditional College Students?
Student Perspectives on Proprietary School Practices

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH FOCUS AND SIGNIFICANCE

It was a typical morning in the counseling/advising center of the community college where I work. As I maneuvered through the narrow, chair-lined waiting room, stepping over feet and backpacks en route to my office, I was greeted by the usual collective look of uncertainty from those waiting to be advised. Yet I knew that this gathering space is where the similarities between these students would end, and that my entire day as a community college student advisor might pass without me seeing a “typical” college student.

Frank, a 48-year old accountant, sought advice on developing a plan of study to present to his employer. Promotions and pay raises were on the line, important incentives for a man funding his son’s engineering studies at a state university. As he sat down, his opening statement signaled a familiar mixed sense of pride and awkwardness. “I know I’m not your usual student,” he began. Silently, I both agreed and disagreed with his assessment. An hour later, when Daniel entered my office, I could not help but smile. Preceding his large bulky frame was a powder blue baby carrier containing his six-month-old son. Yet, as Daniel fumbled through papers with one hand and rocked the carrier with the other, I wondered how he and his wife, both employed full time, would manage while he attended our stringent vocational nursing program. His visit today had made him late for work and he still had to drop his son off at the sitter’s.

As the day progressed, I would see a young female veteran of the Iraq war, a middle-aged woman who had exhausted her financial aid benefits and a 28-year-old female who proclaimed herself “ancient” because she has been out of school for 10 years. Near the end of the day, my “typical” student arrived with his mother. He was a high school senior preparing for college entry in the fall. As we spoke and I encouraged him to go to school full time, his mother agreed based on her own experience. She shared that her attempts to go to college had failed due to her full-time job and family responsibilities. Even while counseling the day’s “typical” student, I was reminded of how difficult pursuing a college education can be for many—if not most—of our students, despite entering through the “open door” of a community college.

In higher education, these students are labeled “nontraditional,” not so much for the kaleidoscope of cultures, experiences, ambitions, and values they bring to campus, but for those traits that they do not possess. Unlike traditional college students, they are not aged 18-24, do not attend full time, and did not enroll immediately after high school. Unlike traditional students, their primary role is more frequently something other than student—employee, parent, or caregiver—with multiple responsibilities fighting for their time, energy, and resources. Yet, while they may not fit the traditional mold, nontraditional students represent the majority in higher education.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports that three of every four undergraduate students are nontraditional, and in institutions where these students are predominantly clustered—community colleges and proprietary schools—some 90 percent of students are nontraditional. The NCES uses the following traits to identify nontraditional students: (a) delays enrollment, (b) attends part time, (c) is financially independent, (d) works full time, (e) has dependents, (f) is a single parent, and (g) does not have a high school diploma. Students with two to three traits are considered moderately nontraditional while those with four or more are considered highly nontraditional (Choy, 2002). These traits will be explored fully in the Review of Literature.

Community colleges, with their flexible and open admissions policies, are creating opportunities for those who otherwise would not have the choice to enter higher education. However, opportunities do not equate to success. Nontraditional students are at higher risk of not achieving their educational ambitions and do not persist as well as traditional students. Further, the greater the number of nontraditional traits held by students, the less likely they are to realize their degree objective (Horn, 1996). Consequently, those institutions to which they are drawn face serious challenges regarding overall student success.

Despite constituting only about 8 percent of the undergraduate student population (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2009), there is evidence that proprietary schools are having greater success with measurable student outcomes than are community colleges. Overall completion rates are both higher and faster (Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000) and students report higher levels of satisfaction (Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006).

Meanwhile, community colleges, which enroll nearly half of all undergraduate students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACCC], n.d.), are struggling with benchmarks such as remedial course completions, persistence, and graduation rates amidst a growing climate of accountability that is focusing less on getting students into college and more on the success of students once they arrive on campus (Harbour, 2003). The Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative, which is promoting a "culture of evidence" through the collection and analyzing of data to improve community college student outcomes (Brock et al., 2007), is reflective of this climate.

If community colleges are to achieve improved outcomes and greater accountability, they must understand the nontraditional student and those practices that work for them. Research on nontraditional students, given their number and diversity, will help to illuminate issues and programs relevant to the entire community college student population (Kim, 2002). Because proprietary schools produce higher completion and satisfaction rates while serving a similar nontraditional student population, community colleges may find useful lessons in their practices.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand, through nontraditional student perspectives, how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of nontraditional students. The study focused on students who are moderately or highly nontraditional because risks to achieving educational success rise with the number of nontraditional traits a student possesses and students with greater risks are disproportionately clustered in community colleges and proprietary schools.

Studying the possible impact of proprietary school practices on nontraditional students provides new perspectives on a sector of higher education that continues to be largely misunderstood (Kinser, 2006a). Given that proprietary schools and community colleges both enroll high percentages of students who are at risk by virtue of being nontraditional (88.7 and 89.5 percent respectively) (Choy, 2002), research tying proprietary school practices to student outcomes has potential value for community college research, policy, and administrative professionals seeking to improve success rates among this group of students.

The function of research questions is to identify what a study will attempt to understand (Maxwell, 2005). The following questions guided my understanding:

- What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?” This question focused on the goals that participants brought with them to college and the expectations they had of the college experience. Its intent was to bring clarity to how their life experiences and nontraditional traits may have influenced these goals and expectations.
- What are the proprietary school practices that moderately to highly nontraditional students feel have contributed to their success in school? This question revealed practices of which participants availed themselves and to what degree. It further explored what it was about these practices that appealed to the students.
- How have these practices contributed to the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students? This question asked participants to think of their educational experience as a conduit to success, to reflect on their growth, and to connect specific practices to that growth. In answering this question, students provided rich description of these practices, which was central to the purpose of this study.

Key Concepts

Following are definitions of key concepts relative to the questions guiding the proposed research. They will be further explored, as appropriate, in the Review of Literature or Design section of this proposal.

Proprietary Schools

Proprietary schools, frequently referred to in the literature as career schools or for-profits, are for-profit institutions of higher education that are privately controlled (Lee & Merisotis, 1990). They are often compared to community colleges, given the two institutions’ shared missions of occupational training and their comparable student demographics (Lee & Merisotis; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Yet they are distinct in that they operate under a business model that uses a centralized, rather than shared, decision

making processes. They are also diverse, ranging from small schools that offer certificates to large national chains that award associate's and bachelor's degrees. Some even confer doctorates. Proprietary schools that are accredited (regionally or nationally) have the same federal student aid status as accredited public institutions of higher education (Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006a).

Although often described in the literature as an emerging phenomenon due to the surge in the number of institutions during the last decade of the 20th century, proprietary schools have continuously existed in this country since the Colonial era (Foster, 2004; Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006a; Ruch, 2001). Following World War II, proprietary schools served more students through the GI Bill than any other type institution (Honick, 1995). Yet today, the sector experiences a lingering reputation for its use of fraudulent practices dating back to this period when schools reported inflated charges to the federal government. In the 1970's and 1980's the sector again abused its privileges as thousands of students became victims of substandard education, fraudulent practices, and low completion and placement rates (Foster). The 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) specifically addressed these abuses by cracking down on unscrupulous practices and raising accreditation standards (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001), resulting in the closure of many schools (Foster).

Kelly (2001) found a 78 percent increase in the number of two-year and a 266 percent increase in the number of four-year, for-profit degree-granting institutions during the last decade of the 20th century. This growth has been attributed to a number of factors. While several authors (Berg, 2005; Kelly; Morey, 2004) have credited the sector's ability to meet the needs of the growing nontraditional student population, Kelly posited that the institutions that survived the 1992 Higher Education Act are now positioned to respond both to this population and to market forces such as globalization that are shaping their educational needs.

Moderately to Highly Nontraditional Students

Moderately nontraditional students are those who possess two to three nontraditional characteristics as designated by the NCES. Highly nontraditional students possess four or more of these characteristics. These students may possess any combination of NCES' seven nontraditional traits (see Introduction section). With each

of these student groups representing 28 percent of the college population, together they account for more than one-half of all college students. At 56 percent, they also outnumber by a ratio of three to one the 17 percent of students who possess only one nontraditional trait and are therefore considered minimally nontraditional (Choy, 2002). Yet, while minimally nontraditional students are evenly represented across all postsecondary sectors, moderately to highly nontraditional students are found in disproportionately high numbers in community colleges and proprietary schools, where three in four students fall within these two groups (Choy). Such statistics underscore the importance of exploring practices that may reduce risks associated with being nontraditional.

Student Success

Success is an experience and as such cannot be strictly defined. Instead, this study set out to understand how students make meaning of that experience. While student success is generally measured by indicators such as persistence, completion, and transfer (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005; Kuh, Kinsey, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, et al., 2007a), these measurements do not provide a complete understanding of what students expect from their college experience. It has been theorized that if a student's experience leads to feeling of success, they will continue to work toward measureable outcomes (Astin, 1993). Bean's student attrition model posits that attitudes lead to intentions which, in turn, lead to behavior. Therefore, a student's attitudes toward the educational experience affect their intent to continue in school, resulting in the behavior of either staying in or leaving school (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean's theory is reflective of the tenets of phenomenology, the interpretive research method used to answer the research questions and which is explored in the Design section.

Kuh et al. (2007a) contended that a broad holistic definition of student success must ask the question, "What happens to students *during* their postsecondary studies?" (p. 10). Clearly, after college completion and upon reflection, student meanings of college success are likely to change. However, it is students' meanings *as students* that prompt their actions *as students*, therefore impacting college success as they perceive it. College decision makers interested in improving college success should try to understand

student meanings so that they can provide practices supportive of student actions that lead to success.

While this study did not arrive at one specific definition for college success, it led to an understanding of meanings that a group moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students attached to the concept and how proprietary school practices made them feel successful within their own contexts. Those meanings could be temporal, but they are a nonetheless a catalyst to actions that impact student success. Therefore, practices geared toward improving student success should take these meanings into account.

Significance

Three reasons compelled me to study how proprietary school practices may promote the success of nontraditional students: (a) A large and growing number of higher education students are nontraditional, putting them at higher risk of not reaching their educational goals; (b) proprietary schools represent a growing segment of higher education that is experiencing documented success with student outcomes; and (c) given increasing accountability expectations, community colleges may be able to learn from proprietary school successes.

Nontraditional Students: A Majority at Risk

Nontraditional students represent a huge majority of today's college population. Based on NCES-designated traits, 73 percent of all undergraduates are nontraditional. While these students are predominantly clustered within public two-year and private, for-profit institutions, where 89 percent of students possess at least one nontraditional trait, there is no sector of higher education in which nontraditional students represent the minority. At public four-year universities, nontraditional students constitute a majority at 58 percent, and at private not-for-profit four-year institutions, they comprise one-half of the population (Choy, 2002). Adding complexity to the expanse of nontraditional students on college campuses is the extent of their nontraditionalism, especially within public two-year and private for-profit institutions. Three out of four students at these institutions possess two or more nontraditional traits (Choy).

From the moment they enroll into college, nontraditional students assume a high

risk of becoming a drop-out statistic. They are more than twice as likely to leave school in their first year as are traditional students (38 percent versus 16 percent). Those who make it through the first year are much less likely to earn a degree within five years of beginning their postsecondary education than their traditional counterparts (43 percent as compared to 64 percent). Of those nontraditional students seeking an associate's degree, one in four is successful, compared to half of the traditional population. Further, there is a negative correlation between the level of nontraditionalism and rates of persistence and graduation. As the number of nontraditional traits per student increases, persistence and graduation rates decrease (Horn, 1996). Research reveals that the risks impacting nontraditional students are many and varied, yet little research addresses the effect of institutional practices on nontraditional student success. This study, which identified possible effects, helps address this void.

Nontraditional Student Success in Proprietary Schools

Despite a history colored by scandal and instability, proprietary schools have “emerged as an integral and increasingly influential part” of higher education (Kelly, 2001, p. 2). While their tremendous growth, especially during the last decade of the 20th century, has generated much interest, they are also being held in higher regard due both to student outcomes and student satisfaction (Kelly; Bailey et al., 2001).

Of students who began at less-than-four-year private for-profit institutions in 1995-96, 54 percent had attained a certificate and 35 percent had attained an associate's degree at the first institution attended by spring 1998, compared to 30 percent and 7 percent respectively for students who began at less-than-four-year public institutions (Berkner et al., 2000). Bailey (2006) discovered that while enrolling just 4 percent of the six million students at two-year institutions in 2002-03, proprietary schools accounted for 13 percent of the total degrees and certificates awarded by all two-year institutions. Research on student satisfaction reveals the common themes of customer service and convenience (Bailey et al., 2001; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006a). Person et al. (2006) found that, compared with community college students, proprietary school students report receiving more information, making fewer mistakes, and having higher confidence about degree completion.

These data present a stark contrast to the negative image generated during the 1970s and 1980s amidst rising default rates on student loans and allegations of consumer exploitation. Spurred by the 1992 reauthorization of the HEA which addressed such abuses (Bailey et al., 2001), this segment of higher education has been forced to transform itself. Today, as a growing sector experiencing relative student success with a nontraditional student population mirroring that of community colleges, proprietary schools and their practices merit further investigation by community colleges who are interested in reducing student risks and raising student outcomes.

Nontraditional Students and Community College Accountability

With their open admissions, low tuition, and convenience, community colleges are “the Ellis Island of American higher education” (National Commission on Community Colleges [NCCC], 2008, p. 5), attracting millions of students who otherwise would not be able to attend college. Yet, increasingly, accountability indicators tend to minimize the importance of open access and the comprehensive mission while emphasizing student educational and economic attainment (Harbour, 2003). Forces bringing about greater attention to community college student outcomes include tighter federal reporting requirements and the increased competition for state funding (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinback, & Kienzl, 2006). In its action agenda for community colleges, NCCC called for greater accountability as community college’s contribution to a “social contract” to keep America competitive in a knowledge- and global-based economy (p. 33).

For community colleges, the difficulty with this new era of accountability lies in a largely nontraditional student population who brings with them a high risk of failure. Nearly half of students who begin at community colleges do not transfer to a four-year college or complete a certificate or degree within eight years of initial enrollment (Brock et al., 2007). Hence, it could be argued that open access is contrary to student success. However, as suggested in a Community College Research Center (CCRC) brief (Bailey et al., 2005), “It is the job of policymakers, researchers, and the colleges themselves to understand what differentiates the more successful institutions and to improve completion rates at all colleges” (p. 41). Proprietary schools responded to increased oversight resulting from the 1992 HEA, and while enrolling very similar student populations, are in

some respects considered more successful institutions than community colleges. This is therefore merit in looking to this sector of higher education for practices that may be worthy of consideration in improving community college success rates.

Summary of Research Focus and Significance

In order to address through student perspectives how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of nontraditional students, three questions formed the basis of the research: (a) What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success”?, (b) What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students?, and (c) How do these practices work to impact the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students? The significance of the study revolved around three compelling realities: (a) A large majority of higher education students are nontraditional, putting them at higher risk of not reaching their educational goals; (b) proprietary schools represent a growing segment of higher education that is experiencing documented success with student outcomes; and (c) given increasing accountability expectations, community colleges may be able to learn from proprietary school successes.

Given the past focus on student input rather than outputs, research on institutional characteristics geared toward impacting nontraditional student success is rare. With the large presence of nontraditional students on campus and the risks they bring, it is becoming increasingly important for educators to learn about practices that promote their success. This study, by presenting the perspectives of proprietary students regarding the influence of proprietary school practices on their success, assists in addressing this research deficiency.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to ground the study in previous relevant research regarding how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of nontraditional students. Additionally, information from this chapter was used to form the basis for the conceptual framework of the study, consisting of: (a) study purpose, research questions, and basis for significance; and (b) choice of appropriate research design (e.g., philosophical approach, research method, and data collection and analysis procedures.)

Approach to Review of the Literature

Using the Oregon State University (OSU) online library system, primary literature searches were conducted via the OSU Libraries Research Databases and OSU Libraries Catalog. Searching within EBSCOhost, specific databases included Academic Search Premier, Dissertation Abstracts, Education Research Complete, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Business Source Premier, and Vocational and Career Collection.

Prior to establishing themes for this literature review, general searches were conducted to gain a familiarity with the topics commonly associated with proprietary schools in recent literature. Searches included the many terms used to refer to proprietary schools, including “proprietary schools,” “proprietary colleges,” “for-profit colleges,” “for-profits,” and “career colleges.”

As the themes began to materialize from the initial literature scan, reference lists from the literature proved useful in identifying articles specific to those themes. I also followed various authors through the Web of Science’s Cited Reference Search Page to locate other articles referencing them. It was also useful to take a more direct approach by using the same keywords to search specific journals and databases. A separate search of ERIC, for instance, revealed new results. Meanwhile, a separate search of peer-reviewed, community college-specific journals confirmed the dearth of articles on proprietary schools. Google Scholar was utilized in the search as were general search engines on the World Wide Web. The website of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provided a wealth of statistical data as did contact with one of their

researchers. Online book retailer sites were also searched. In addition, two researchers were contacted and responded with leads to additional publications of theirs.

While the initial database search provided an adequate springboard for locating articles on proprietary schools, including their history and student success practices, the database search was repeated to focus on the theme of nontraditional college students. Added to this search was the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. Keywords employed with this search included “nontraditional students” and “higher education,” “nontraditional college students,” and “proprietary school students.” A separate database search on the topic of community college accountability was done of the initially selected databases, and using such terms as “community college” and “accountability” and “community college” and “culture of evidence.” Following the database searches for nontraditional students and community college accountability, the processes outlined above for the initial search on proprietary schools were repeated as well.

As is noted in the literature review, the complexion of proprietary schools and the manner in which their student data is collected nationally has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Therefore, priority was given to works written with past 15 years. When it was appropriate to provide historical context, older literature was incorporated into the literature review. Qualitative and quantitative studies from research journals, papers from governmental and educational organizations, and research-based popular press books were used for the review. Opinion articles and papers were reviewed to better understand current issues surrounding proprietary schools but were used primarily as a catalyst for exploration of research-based literature on relevant themes.

Organization of Review of the Literature

The review of literature is organized to support the three claims of significance outlined in Chapter 1 in order to establish the study as an important contribution to the research on proprietary school practices. First, the study sought the perspectives of nontraditional students as a large, at-risk population for which college practices may make a difference. Therefore, the opening section is devoted to an examination of these students—how the literature defines them, their enrollment patterns, and the risks and needs associated with being a nontraditional student. Second, proprietary school practices were the focus of the study due to the schools’ large nontraditional enrollments

and respectable student outcomes. Thus, in the second section, background is provided on proprietary schools, defining them in terms of their mission and their place within higher education, giving an historical context for them, and offering explanations for the recognition they are currently receiving.

Given some understanding of nontraditional students and knowledge about proprietary schools, the context is set for the third section, in which proprietary school outcome data are connected with student success practices as identified in the literature. Through the fourth and final section is addressed the third claim of significance, which is that accountability requirements for community colleges are growing. An understanding of this trend sets the tone for why community colleges might well consider exploring proprietary schools' best practices in serving nontraditional student success.

Nontraditional College Students

In order to determine how proprietary school practices may contribute to nontraditional student success, it was important to first understand who nontraditional students are and the challenges they face. Such is the focus of this section of the review of literature. This section begins with a description of how the literature has defined and characterized the nontraditional student. Having some understanding of this complex student population provided for this research a context through which student perspectives were heard. Second, enrollment patterns of nontraditional students within higher education are examined. The commonality that this student population represents between proprietary schools and community colleges speaks to the necessity of this study. In the two final sections are revealed the risks that hinder nontraditional student success and the needs that result, setting the foundation for a later discussion on how proprietary schools may be promoting student success.

Defining Nontraditional Students

This section is devoted to answering the question, Who are nontraditional students? Three steps are taken toward that end: (a) examining the various definitions and characteristics ascribed to the nontraditional student by researchers; (b) introducing the NCES criteria for defining nontraditional students, including rationale for its use; and (c) providing insights into the complexity of this student population.

Nontraditional Students as Defined by the Research

A quarter century ago, Bean and Metzner (1985) predicted, "...it seems unlikely that a widely acceptable formula can be derived that precisely distinguishes traditional from nontraditional students" (p. 488). The literature has since confirmed their predication as researchers have yet to arrive at a consistent definition of "non-traditional student" (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996; Hughes, 1993; Kim, 2002). Further, the literature echoes concerns that the lack of a consistent definition is problematic in researching nontraditional students. Lamented Hughes, "This lack of a consistent definition in the literature has made it difficult to extract a clear picture of who the nontraditional student is" (p. 52). Bean and Metzner half seriously suggested that it would be easier to define nontraditional students by what they are not—traditional students, who are generally defined as being 18 to early 20's in age, attending college full time, and having entered college directly out of high school (Levin, 2007; Wyndham, 1995).

Among the attempts to define the nontraditional student, age is the characteristic most commonly used (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996; Kim, 2002). "Age acts as a 'surrogate variable,'" wrote Horn (p. 3), "in that it captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives." Confirming Horn's observation, this literature review located several articles using the terms "adult student" and "nontraditional student" interchangeably (Chao & Good, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Bauman et al., 2004). The age commonly assigned to nontraditional students is 24 or 25 and older.

In addition to age, Kim (2002) found that two other factors have been consistently used by researchers to define nontraditional students. They are: (a) background characteristics, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first-generation student status; and (b) factors that may increase students' risk of attrition such as working full time or being a single parent. Hughes' (1993) synthesis of the literature on nontraditional students noted three characteristics consistently used to define them: (a) diversely committed, or having multiple responsibilities outside of college; (b) off-campus directedness; and (c) a preference for informal learning. Levin (2007) underscored the abundance of definitions by noting 10 traits that research and policy studies use to

identify nontraditional students, including the aforementioned and others such as gender, familial relationships, citizen and immigrant status, and geographical location.

The major theme running through the various descriptors of nontraditional students is the competition of outside influences with educational aspirations. It is clear that while age may be a mediating variable—given adults' greater chance of possessing characteristics that hinder educational pursuits—adulthood is not a prerequisite for being nontraditional. As a researcher studying college practices, I acknowledged that practices cannot respond to age, yet they may be able to respond to particular risk factors that are more prevalent in adults but also exist in younger students.

NCES Criteria for Nontraditional Students

Some authors (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kim, 2002) have suggested that it is of greater value to examine specific subpopulations of nontraditional students in order to define *and* acknowledge the diversity of this population. NCES has done so with a set of nontraditional characteristics that it has consistently applied since 1996 in numerous quantitative studies on nontraditional students. These seven traits are grouped into three sets of criteria as follows:

Enrollment patterns

- Delays enrollment: Student does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school.
- Attends part time: Student is less than full time for at least part of the academic year.

Financial and family status

- Is financially independent: Student is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid (24 years or older, married, a veteran, responsible for dependents other than a spouse, or is an orphan or ward of the court).
- Works full time: Student works 35 hours or more per week.
- Has dependents: Student has dependents other than a spouse.
- Is a single parent: Student is not married or is separated and has dependents.

High school graduation status

- Does not have a high school diploma: Student completed high school with a GED or other completion certificate or did not finish high school (Choy, 2002).

The commonality among these criteria, according to NCES, is that they represent choices and behaviors that may increase students' risk of attrition and are amenable to change or intervention at various stages in a student's college career (Horn, 1996).

Further, NCES recognizes levels of nontraditionalism based on the number of traits a student possesses. Students with one trait are minimally nontraditional, students with two to three are moderately nontraditional, and students with four or more are highly nontraditional. The relevance of this ranking system is that the more nontraditional traits a student possesses, the greater the risk that the student will not achieve his or her educational goals (Horn, 1996).

Unlike demographic characteristics such as age or gender that may serve as mediators to risk, the NCES criteria speak to those factors that have the potential to influence student success (Horn, 1996). Further, they have been used consistently by NCES for over a decade. For these reasons, I used NCES criteria in selecting my study participants. Specifically, I chose to study moderately to highly nontraditional students for reasons forthcoming in this literature review.

Two NCES reports contributed heavily to the nontraditional student data found in this review of literature:

- Nontraditional Undergraduates: Findings from the Condition of Education 2002 (Choy, 2002)
- Nontraditional Undergraduates: Trends in Enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment Among 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students (Horn, 1996)

Each of the reports used the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to provide demographic characteristics and enrollment patterns, and the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) longitudinal study, which follows students who are enrolled in a postsecondary institution for the first time, to analyze postsecondary experiences of students.

The Complexity of Nontraditional Students

While the many traits used to define them speak to the diversity among nontraditional students, a connectivity between and overlap of these traits speaks to their complexity and may explain why researchers have employed various definitions. Based on NCES criteria, the average nontraditional student possesses 2.2 nontraditional characteristics (Horn, 1996). Some characteristics occur together by definition. As examples, a single parent always has dependents while persons who work full time are likely to attend college part time (Choy, 2002). Table 1 illustrates the coexistence of multiple nontraditional traits.

Table 1

Percentage of Students with Select NCES Traits Who Possess Other NCES Nontraditional Traits

Nontraditional characteristic	Financially independent	Attended part time	Delayed enrollment	Worked full time	Had dependents	Single parent	No HS diploma
Delayed enrollment	74.1	61.7	100	52	39.7	19.6	9.2
Worked full time	72	73.3	48.4	100	40.7	16.6	7.1
No HS diploma	78.7	58.6	76.1	46.2	47.6	28.7	100

Note. Adapted from NCES' National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000), as cited in Choy (2002).

The consequences of this web of connectivity for the study was that a heterogeneous sample emerged, suiting the research to an interpretive study in which significance may be derived from shared patterns emerging from heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). This research approach will be further discussed in the Design section.

Summary

In summary, researchers have defined nontraditional students in various ways due to the diversity and complexity of this student population. A lack of a consistent definition poses challenges to having a common dialogue about them. The only formal delineating system found in the literature is NCES criteria established in 1996. These seven criteria are relevant to research regarding student success because they pertain to choices and behavior that may increase students' risk of attrition and are amenable to change or intervention during a student's college career. Given NCES' consistent use of these criteria and that the study presents the possibility that college practices may play a role in reducing associated risks, NCES criteria were used to identify study participants. Yet, even within this delineation of nontraditional students, nontraditional students remain a complex population due to myriad combinations of overlap among categories. My research approach was therefore interpretive in order to embrace the heterogeneity among this population.

Enrollment Patterns of Nontraditional Students

Within this section is presented a snapshot of nontraditional students in institutions of higher education. This information informed the research in terms of those nontraditional characteristics that are more prevalent among college students. First, a detailed view of the traits nontraditional students bring to campus is provided. Then, with a focus on community colleges and proprietary schools, data are given regarding their enrollment in the various sectors of higher education.

The Nontraditional Student on Campus

Nontraditional students represent a very diverse and complex population that is also very large. Seventy-three percent of undergraduates, or three in four students, possess at least one of the seven NCES nontraditional traits, as shown in Figure 1. The most common of these characteristics are: (a) financially independent, (b) attended part

time, and (c) delayed enrollment, with roughly one half of students reporting each of these characteristics.

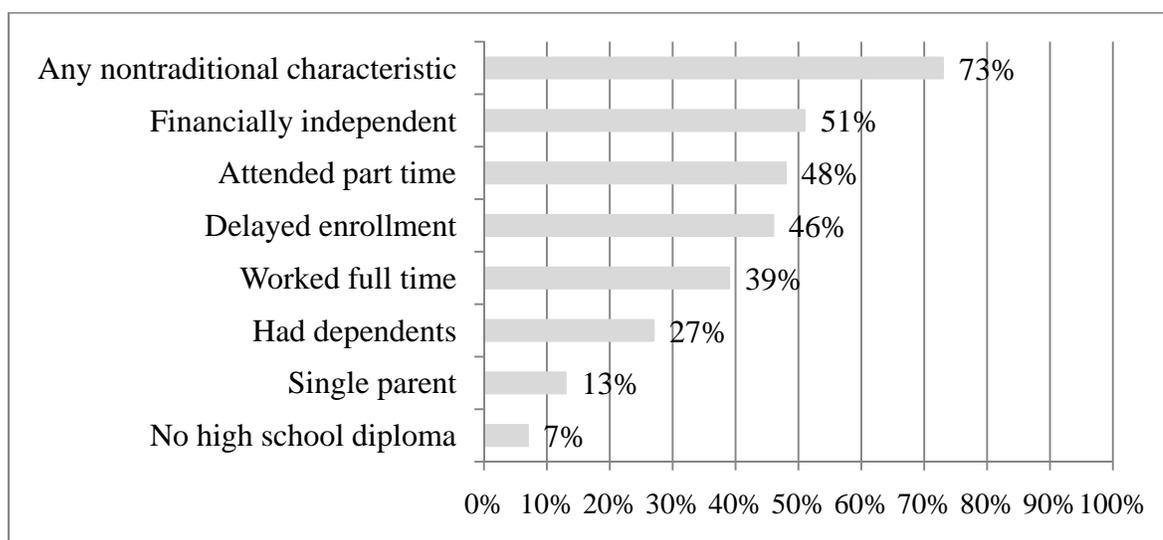


Figure 1: Percentage of undergraduates with nontraditional characteristics: 1999-2000. Adapted from NCES' National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000), as cited in Choy (2002).

As is evidenced by the Figure 1 and previously noted, students are likely to possess more than one trait. In fact, only 17 percent of all undergraduate students have only one NCES nontraditional characteristic and are therefore considered minimally nontraditional. The 28 percent with two to three characteristics are considered moderately traditional. An additional 28 percent have four or more characteristics, making them highly nontraditional (Choy, 2002). Table 2 shows how the seven NCES nontraditional characteristics contribute to the levels of nontraditionalism. As the number of nontraditional characteristics increases, the impact that they have on each other becomes apparent. For instance, it is easy to see that someone who works full time and has dependents will likely attend college part time.

Table 2

Percentage of Students at Each Level of Nontraditionalism Possessing Each NCES Nontraditional Trait

Nontraditional status	Financially independent	Attended Part time	Delayed enrollment	Worked full time	Had dependents	Single parent	No HS diploma
Minimally Nontraditional	15.2	36.2	22.8	22.8	0	0	2.2
Moderately Nontraditional	68	63.8	42.2	51.5	18.7	3.8	5.2
Highly Nontraditional	99.4	80.4	76.3	75	79.6	38.6	15.1

Note. Adapted from NCES' National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000), as cited in Choy (2002).

Despite the quantitative nature of this research, these data illustrate how life can get in the way of an education. From studying Table 2, many profiles of the highly nontraditional student can emerge. One such profile is that of a young man who has decided to pursue a college credential after being out of academia for several years. Because he is financially responsible for himself and his dependents, he works full time. With limited time and resources available to him to pay for and attend college, he can only attend college part time, prolonging attainment of his educational goals. Such insights emerging from this data forge a foundation upon which an understanding of the nontraditional student can be achieved.

Nontraditional Students at Community Colleges and Proprietary Schools

The relevance of this study is enhanced by narrowing the focus to the predominance of nontraditional students at public two-year and for-profit colleges. As Table 3 illustrates, based on NCES standards, some 89 percent of students at these schools are nontraditional, as compared with 58 percent at public four-year institutions (Choy, 2002). Further, the more nontraditional students are, the greater the likelihood they will attend a community college or proprietary school.

Table 3

Percentage of Undergraduates According to Student Status, by Institution Type

Type of institution	Traditional	Non-traditional	Minimally nontraditional	Moderately nontraditional	Highly nontraditional
Total	27.4	72.6	16.6	28.3	27.7
Public 2-year	10.5	89.5	14.3	35.0	40.2
Private for-profit	11.3	88.7	14.7	38.5	35.4
Public 4-year	42.5	57.5	20.0	23.1	14.4
Private not-for-profit 4-year	50.0	50.0	14.7	16.4	19.0

Note. Adapted from NCES' National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000), as cited in Choy (2002).

Table 4 compares the nontraditional student makeup of proprietary schools and community colleges. In all but two categories, proprietary schools carry a higher percentage of nontraditional students. The two traits in which populations are less nontraditional—attends part time and works full time—frequently occur together. Because the two traits have been negatively associated with persistence and attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998), these statistics indicate that proprietary school practices may promote attendance and work patterns that positively affect student persistence and attainment. This possibility will be explored in the section of this review of literature titled Student Success in Proprietary Schools.

Table 4

Percentage of Undergraduates with Each Nontraditional Characteristic, by Institution Type

Type of institution	Financially independent	Attended part time	Delayed enrollment	Worked full time	Had dependents	Single parent	No HS diploma
Public 2-year	63.7	69.5	58.7	53.8	34.5	16.4	9.8
Private for-profit	72.9	21.5	67.8	40.8	44.3	26.6	15.6

Note. Adapted from NCES' National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 2000), as cited in Choy (2002).

Summary

Three out of every four students in higher education are nontraditional, with more than half possessing two or more nontraditional traits. The majority is even larger in community colleges and proprietary schools where nontraditional students represent 89 of the student body. Further, the greater the number of nontraditional traits a student has, the more likely he or she will attend a community college or proprietary school. The most common nontraditional traits are financially independent, attended part time, delayed enrollment, and worked full time, with each affecting about one-half of all students. In comparing the nontraditional enrollments of proprietary schools and community colleges, proprietary schools report much lower percentages of students who attend part time and work full time, which could be indicative of practices contributing to student success.

Risks Associated with Being a Nontraditional Student

Regardless of how students may differ, in order to be successful they must remain enrolled (Windham, 1995). Nontraditional students are at greater risk of not doing so. In order to address needs of nontraditional students, an understanding of the risks that can impact their enrollment is critical. The purpose of this section is to examine persistence and degree (or certificate) attainment of nontraditional students, underscoring the fact that, compared to traditional students, this population underperforms in both areas. The literature's characterization of nontraditional traits as risks to achieving these two outcomes is also examined.

Persistence and Attainment

Using the descriptions of Berkner et al. (2000), persistence refers to all students who continue to be enrolled until they complete a program, and therefore includes those who attained a degree. Attainment means the completion of a program and the earning of a degree, defined broadly to include certificates. Nontraditionalism appears to negatively affect both outcomes, as suggested by Horn's (1996) analysis of 1989-90 beginning postsecondary students with a degree objective who attained any degree or were still enrolled in 1994 (see Table 5).

Four in 10 nontraditional students will not persist beyond their first year of study, making them more than twice as likely to leave college as traditional students (Horn,

1996). As Table 5 indicates, first-year attrition is even higher for nontraditional students pursuing associate's degree or certificates. While attrition declines for all students each year, it continues to be notably higher for nontraditional ones, particularly in the third year for those pursuing an associate's degree.

Table 5

Percentage of 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students According to Their Enrollment Continuity, by Nontraditional Status and Initial Degree Objective

	Annual rates of attrition (first enrollment interruption)			
	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year or later
Traditional	16.2	12.2	14.5	8.8
Nontraditional	38.3	20.7	20.6	8.8
Bachelor's degree				
Traditional	19.1	12.5	17.3	10.8
Nontraditional	27.2	17.0	20.1	12.4
Associate's degree				
Traditional	23.1	17.3	17.8	
Nontraditional	46.4	28.7	40	
Certificate				
Traditional	23.1	23.2	11.5	
Nontraditional	43.2	17.0	14.9	

Note. Adapted from NCES' Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Followup (BPS: 90/94), as cited in Horn (1996).

There are three means of departure as outlined in Horn's study: (a) transfer to another institution, (b) stopping out for more than four months, and (c) leaving without returning. About one-half of nontraditional students who leave never return, compared to about one-third of traditional students who leave college.

As shown in Table 6, Horn (1996) found that nontraditional students are also twice as likely not to attain an associate's degree and that the more nontraditional students were, the less likely they were to realize their degree objective. The attainment gap narrows significantly for those students seeking a certificate's degree, suggesting that

perhaps nontraditional students can deal with outside influences or other risk factors effectively over a shorter period of time or that maybe fast-track programs are a better fit with their college-related goals.

Table 6

Percentage Distribution of All 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students With a Reported Degree Objective According to Their Persistence and Attainment of Degree Objective by 1994 by Student Status

Attained degree objective	
Associate's degree objective	
Traditional	53.4
Nontraditional	26.7
Minimally nontraditional	37.2
Moderately nontraditional	24.5
Highly nontraditional	15.6
Vocational certificate objective	
Traditional	61.3
Nontraditional	54.0
Minimally nontraditional	55.4
Moderately nontraditional	56.6
Highly nontraditional	50.0

Note. Adapted from NCES' Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Followup (BPS: 90/94), as cited in Horn (1996).

Relationship Between Nontraditional Traits and Persistence and Attainment

In her study, Horn (1996) also investigated the relationships between the various NCES nontraditional characteristics and the goals of persistence and attainment. The analysis showed that the following nontraditional characteristics were negatively associated with persistence: (a) delayed enrollment, (b) attended part time, (c) financial independent, and (d) having a GED or other certificate of completion. Working full time and having dependents did not independently affect persistence, but did predict part-time and delayed enrollment and indirectly affected persistence. Only single parenthood did not have a measureable independent direct or indirect effect.

For each characteristic, the study controlled for the remaining six characteristics and for other variables also likely to affect persistence, including gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the control and level of institution. A comparison of the adjusted and unadjusted percentages illustrates the impact that having multiple risk characteristics can have on persistence and attainment. For example, the adjusted percentage of students who attended part time and persisted or completed was 58 percent, compared with the unadjusted rate of 49 percent. The adjusted percentage for GED recipients was 51 percent, as compared to the unadjusted rate of 41 percent.

Summary

In order to work toward student success, it is important to understand the obstacles that can stand in its way. Statistics reveal a negative relationship between nontraditional student traits and student success, described here as persistence and attainment. In the area of student persistence, traditional students outperform nontraditional students by a margin of two to one during the first year of enrollment. They outperform them at the same ratio in the attainment of associate's degrees. Using NCES criteria, Horn (1996) determined that the most likely detriments to success are: (a) delayed enrollment, (b) enrolled part time, (c) financially independent, and (d) having a GED or other certificate of completion. Because students are likely to possess a combination of these and other characteristics, their risks are compounded.

What Horn's study does not speak to is the ways in which these characteristics impact student success. For example, what academic and emotional issues must a student who has delayed enrollment face upon making the decision to return to school? By understanding the characteristics that accompany NCES traits, my study helps address this question.

Needs of Nontraditional Students

According to Levin (2007), the combination of student characteristics and institutional behaviors work to affect both student experiences and likely student outcomes. In order for institutional behaviors to positively impact students, it is important for the institution to understand student needs. Many of the needs of nontraditional students and why they exist will be explored in this section.

Several authors that suggested that the most basic needs of nontraditional students derive from a lack of the social or cultural capital required to be successful in school (Karp, O’Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Person et al., 2006; Valadez, 1993). Students may not have the knowledge to understand or navigate college processes such as enrolling into college or registering for class; to initiate information gathering; or to manage conflicting demands. “A lack of such knowledge leaves some students—especially those marginalized by the dominant culture, like working-class and racial and ethnic minority students—at a disadvantage in the competition for academic credentials” (Person et al., p. 375). Students from low-income families, for example, may not receive college advice from parents and as a result may seek out information based on wrong assumptions. In my experience as a student advisor, I have encountered both entering and current students who have told me that they do not even know which questions to ask. A huge need stemming from students’ inability to negotiate processes, say researchers, is for community colleges to reduce barriers by simplifying processes and making them easier to access ((Karp et al.) or “making the implicit explicit” (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003, p. 141).

A lack of academic preparedness can be another significant factor differentiating nontraditional students, as evidenced by their lower than average scores on standardized tests (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). More likely to need remedial courses, they are required to stay in college longer, which can discourage them from completing their program of study (Chen, 2005). Macari, Maples, and D’Andrea (2006) found that nontraditional students lag behind their counterparts in defining educational goals and plans and that they also experience more difficulty in developing a sense of academic autonomy. Valadez (1993) suggested that colleges examine teaching practices to determine if traditional methods are meeting the needs of nontraditional students.

While nontraditional students may fall short in the areas of social know-how and academic preparedness, the one thing they do not lack is complexity in their lives. The many competing demands, ranging from family to work, create a need for practicality in pursuing higher education (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). According to Levine (2001), those needs can be reduced to four things: convenience, service, quality, and low cost. Belcastro and Purslow (2006) refer to nontraditional student lifestyle-related needs

as “foundational” (p. 4), including among them childcare, financial aid, a choice of instructional delivery methods, and flexible and available services, location, and schedule. From a curriculum-related perspective, Compton et al. suggested that coursework could be aimed toward practical applications to suit nontraditional students’ career-focused goals and that requirements to move through the educational system could be curtailed through practices such as awarding credit for experiential learning,

In addition to foundational needs, nontraditional students come to campus in need of emotional support that will help them transition as students (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006; Compton et al., 2006; Valadez, 1993). The authors suggested that counseling should be available to help students cope with the many stresses of their lives, including the role of student, and that faculty should work toward creating a positive experience for them in the classroom.

To summarize, nontraditional students have needs which differentiate them from traditional students. These needs derive from a lack of social and cultural capital and academic preparedness, which can impact their development as students, as well as from complex lives that demand practicality in the educational process and emotional support from those who educate them. While each of the afore-mentioned researchers offered specific means of meeting nontraditional student needs, the central theme lies in systematic, coherent support systems that are both accessible and understandable. This review of nontraditional student needs informed the interview process of my study, allowing me to look for connections between participants’ needs and proprietary school practices that addressed those needs.

Summary

The groundwork was laid to establish the need for further research aimed at understanding nontraditional students. As revealed in this section, this student population is so diverse and complex that the literature has failed to capture a common definition for it, underscoring both the necessity for and challenges associated with further research. Based on NCES criteria, three out of every four of all college students are nontraditional, with that statistic rising to nine out of every 10 in proprietary schools and community colleges. These students represent a population at high risk of underperforming in the outcomes of persistence and attainment. They are twice as likely to leave college in their

first year and are half as likely to attain an associate's degree. Needs arising from being nontraditional derive from a lack of social know-how, academic unpreparedness, and leading complex lives.

By examining nontraditional student risk factors and needs through the voices of students, this study provides contextual data through which to connect institutional practices with student success. Given the size of this population, it stands that research on nontraditional student success in proprietary schools can inform community college practices leading to improved overall institutional effectiveness. My research focused on moderately to highly nontraditional students as characterized by the NCES. These students represent a population facing diverse and complex issues affecting their educational success.

Proprietary Schools

Because the impact that their practices may have on student success was the focus of the study, it was important to understand how proprietary schools fit within the realm of higher education. This section of the literature review begins with a definition of these institutions, inclusive of their mission. Proprietary schools are then "placed" within higher education respective of community colleges by comparing the two sectors. A brief history follows, putting into context proprietary schools' dual reputation as being both scandalous and market savvy. Explanations for proprietary schools' recent emergence are then presented, along with the response it has generated, particularly within the community college sector. Last, the role of oversight in shaping the sector is explored.

Definition

Also referred to as private career schools or for-profits, proprietary schools may be in simplest terms defined as for-profit educational organizations that are privately controlled (Lee & Merisotis, 1990). This diverse sector of higher education ranges from the large national chains such as the University of Phoenix to small schools that offer specialized training in areas such as truck driving or cosmetology. They may or may not be degree-granting.

While several classifications for the sector have been proposed (Kinser, 2006a), the literature most commonly cites those proposed by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). In her ECS study on degree-granting institutions, Kelly (2001) described “enterprise colleges” as being privately owned and operated by an individual or small company and consisting of one or more campuses serving a specific region. Most have enrollments of fewer than 500 students per campus with total enrollments ranging up to 3,000. “Super systems,” traded on the New York Stock Exchange, have multiple campuses in multiple states. “Internet institutions” exclusively deliver their instruction via the internet.

Kinser (2006a) pointed out that proprietary schools differ from non-profit colleges not only by their ability to make a profit, but by how they are allowed to spend it. While non-profits must channel excess revenue to their nonprofit objectives, for-profit revenues are generally routed to owners and/or investors. In fact, NCES defines proprietary schools as “private institution[s] in which the individual(s) or agency in control receives compensation other than wages, rent, or other expenses for the assumption of risk” (as cited in Kinser, pp. 8-9). While proprietary schools have admittedly much higher tuitions than do public colleges, the profit motive is not the sole reason for this. Unlike public institutions, they must pay taxes and do not receive public subsidies (Ruch, 2001).

The primary mission of proprietary schools is to prepare graduates for jobs or career advancement. They tend to specialize, offering a narrow array of short-term programs limited to high-demand occupational or professional fields (Bailey, 2006; Foster, 2004; Kelly, 2001). As such, their campus enrollments are smaller (Bailey). Among the top areas in which degrees are granted are: business management, marketing and related support services, computer and information sciences, visual and performing arts, engineering-related technologies, and health professions and related sciences (National Education Association [NEA], 2004).

Lee and Topper (2006) noted three major distinctions between the proprietary sector and traditional higher education, all of which are tied to mission. First, proprietary schools are not bound by a sense of tradition; they operate under business models, utilizing centralized, rather than shared, decision making processes. For example, faculty are expected to spend most of their time teaching and have little if any control over the

curriculum. Further, faculty do not receive tenure (Kinser, 2006a). Second, proprietary schools stress occupational training, not the liberal arts. Third, because they are more driven by the market, student demand, and profit motive, they realize their mission by being flexible, accessible, and efficient. These traits, identified in the literature for helping shape the sector's appeal to nontraditional students, will be explored further in the Student Success in Proprietary Schools section of this review of literature

To summarize, proprietary schools are for-profit educational organizations that are privately controlled. Among the sector's most distinct characteristics is a mission tied to career development for its students and a profit for its institutions. This mission is realized through a business model that favors innovation over tradition.

Proprietary Schools and Community Colleges Compared

Chief among the similarities between proprietary schools and community colleges are their student populations and program offerings. As was shown in the Nontraditional College Students section of this review of literature, the vast majority of each institution's student population is nontraditional. According to Zamani-Gallaher (2004), both institutions have been "important contributors to the higher education community's attempts to equalize access and broaden postsecondary opportunities for the disenfranchised groups" (p. 68). Yet, such equal access has been the result of different strategies. While community colleges are known for their historical commitment to open access (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2007; Levin, 2007), proprietary schools are often cited for their aggressiveness in reaching new or underserved markets (Lee & Topper, 2006). Critics of proprietary schools warn that their pursuit of profit risks quality for quantity (Foster, 2004; Kelly, 2001), yet proponents say that it complements rather than contradicts the social good because economic return is linked to student outcomes (Kinser, 2000a; Lee & Topper; Ruch, 2001).

A second major similarity between proprietary schools and community colleges is that they both educate students for the workforce through occupational programs. (Person et al., 2006; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). This similarity drives their similar student populations, as most nontraditional students enter college for job-related training (Kelly, 2001; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Like community colleges, many proprietary schools offer associate's degrees, and like proprietary schools, many

community colleges offer short-term programs that award certificates. Bailey et al. (2001) observed that while career preparation is the primary mission of proprietary schools, it is but one of many for community colleges. Yet, as Kelly pointed out, students in all higher education sectors are choosing occupational programs in increasing numbers, underscoring the importance of this mission.

In summary, proprietary schools and community colleges share two very important similarities. First, while they may have arrived at them differently, their student populations are both predominantly nontraditional. Second, they both prepare students for the workforce through occupational programs, even though job preparation is a singular mission for proprietary schools and one of many for community colleges. It is conceivable that within an institution sharing such major characteristics with community colleges there are practices that can be informative, if not instructive, to them.

History

Proprietary schools have a long history in this country, one which demonstrates both their ability to meet the evolving educational needs of society and their capacity for opportunism. Having continuously existed in this country since the Colonial era (Foster, 2004; Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006a; Ruch, 2001), proprietary schools are a “traditional institution in the United States” (Honick, p. 28). According to Kinser, almost 25 percent of today’s regionally accredited for-profit institutions have origins dating back more than 100 years. Traced to the 1600’s, schools of the Colonial era taught such skills as business, surveying, and the building trades. During the early 1800’s, the colleges existed “on a parallel track with apprenticeship programs and public education to meet the social and economic need for knowledge and skill training” (Foster, p. 13). Throughout the next 150 years, the schools rode post-war and economic growth tides, including the industrial expansion era following the Civil War and the need to train veterans of World War II and the Vietnam War (Honick).

Among the decisive events for proprietary schools was the industrial revolution of the early 19th century. Small business that had once managed their training needs through apprenticeships now needed to hire skilled workers. Reacting to this demand, proprietary schools began to institutionalize their curriculum and establish permanent school sites (Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006a). Although their role waned by the turn of the century due

to the more dominant public-supported institutions, they remained viable for the next few decades due to population growth (Kinser). Perhaps the greatest turning point for proprietary schools came with the passage of the GI Bill in 1944. Resultant from World War II, the bill allowed veterans to attend proprietary schools and receive reimbursement for their educational costs. Proprietary schools served nearly 1.7 million students through the GI Bill, more than any other institution type. However, many of them benefitted not only from student enrollment, but by reporting excessive charges to the U.S. Treasury, exposing “the potential for-profits could have for putting profit ahead of education” (Honick, p. 37). That potential was recognized in the passage of the 1965 HEA which required that schools be accredited in order for their students to receive federal student aid (Lee & Merisotis, 1990).

The 1972 reauthorization of the HEA, designed to give students greater access to postsecondary education (Hittman, 1995), granted accredited proprietary schools the same federal student aid status as other higher education institutions. This act, in effect, viewed proprietary schools as educational, rather than business institutions (Honick, 1995; Kinser, 2006a). Yet, once again, some institutions abused their privileges. Thousands of students over the next two decades became victims of substandard education, fraudulent practices, and low completion and placement rates. Loan default rates escalated (Foster, 2004). The 1992 reauthorization of the HEA specifically addressed these abuses as it “increased the minimum length of eligible programs, decreased institutional reliance on Title IV funding sources, tightened recruiting and admissions procedures, and established more stringent accreditation standards” (Bailey et al., 2001, p. 11). Each progressive crackdown on proprietary schools resulted in school closures (Foster), yet the schools continued not only to survive, but to transform themselves, as shown by the resurgence they are experiencing today.

To summarize, proprietary schools’ history in this country dates back to the Colonial Era. They have met the country’s evolving educational needs brought on by such society-altering events as the Industrial Revolution and post-war eras. Yet, their success has been marred by unscrupulous business practices, leading to increased regulation. While examining this history helps explain why proprietary schools have a notorious reputation, it also helps justify this study. First, the fact that 25 percent of

today's regionally accredited proprietary schools can trace their roots back over a century indicates that reputable proprietary schools exist, some with a tradition longer than that of community colleges. Second, proprietary schools represent a viable sector that has responded to training needs amidst controversy and increased scrutiny.

Re-emergence

The current re-emergence experienced by the proprietary school sector can be evidenced through growth statistics, particularly since 1990. Researchers have attributed this growth to a number of factors. The sector's re-emergence has generated an ongoing debate about whether and how this sector impacts community colleges and has created feelings within the community college sector ranging from anxiety to indifference.

Growth

Today, despite the fact that proprietary schools enroll just 8 percent of college students in this country, their rapid growth has prompted recent literature to portray them as an emerging force in higher education (Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006a; Lee & Topper, 2006; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004). Kelly found that during the last decade of the 20th century, there was a 78 percent increase in the number of two-year and a 266 percent increase in the number of four-year, for-profit degree-granting institutions. In 2003, the for-profit sector included about 800 degree-granting institutions and 3,500 non-degree-granting institutions. Together, they accounted for \$6.2 billion in revenue, primarily through tuition payments from approximately 800,000 students (Kinser). The growth seems to be continuing. The NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2008 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009) shows that degree-granting institutions alone enrolled almost 1.2 million students in Fall 2007 at 1,036 institutions.

Reasons for Current Re-emergence

The emergence of proprietary schools has been attributed to a number of factors. Several authors (Berg, 2005; Kelly, 2001; Morey, 2004) pointed directly to their ability to meet the demands of the growing number of nontraditional students, including adults who are drawn to their convenience, accelerated and flexible occupational programs, and customer service. Kelly further posited that the stronger institutions who survived the scandals and stronger regulations of the 1992 HEA positioned themselves to respond both

to this growing population and to the market forces shaping their educational needs. Among those forces are: (a) an increasingly knowledge-based, global economy requiring advanced training and education; (b) emerging technologies that enable institutions to deliver courses in a variety of ways; and (c) the rising costs of traditional colleges and universities, which are growing one-third faster than the consumer price index (Keller, 2001; Morey). Even though most proprietary schools are privately owned, Kinser (2006a) suggested that the “Wall Street orientation of for-profit education” (p. 39) explains the current prominence of the sector. Twelve corporations collectively now own nearly 900 campuses, enrolling more than half of all students in degree-granting institutions. Notable among these corporations are the Apollo Group (University of Phoenix), DeVry, ITT, and Kaplan, organizations that Kelly referred to as “super systems.”

Lee and Topper (2006) predicted that proprietary schools will experience continued growth and acceptability, given the confluence of several circumstances:

The movement toward market-oriented financing for education, the unwillingness of traditional education to undertake significant productivity improvements, and the increasing need for specialized skills all open the door to a growing proprietary sector that will become an increasingly important part of the occupational oriented training and education capacity in this nation. (p. 89)

Response From the Community College Sector

As a researcher contributing information about proprietary school practices that may be applicable to community colleges, I felt it was important for me to understand the community college perspective regarding this sector. Kelly (2001) described the community college response as one “that has ranged from disparagement to emulation” (p. 2). While the literature is scarce on emulation, articles with titles such as the NEA’s “Proprietary Education: Threat or Not?” (2004) demonstrate the anxiety that the sector’s rapid growth created.

Among the concerns expressed by community college leaders have been that proprietary schools, who can develop programs more quickly, may cherry pick programs that train for the most profitable markets, leaving public institutions with the least profitable operations (Bailey, 2006; Immerwahr, 2002). However, if there was any anxiety about losing students to this sector, it has been subverted by rising community

college enrollments coupled with stagnant or declining state funding (Bailey; Floyd, 2005). Bailey et al. (2001) concluded that the schools are not a threat for a number of reasons, including: (a) their relatively low number of enrollments, (b) their much higher tuition, and (c) their concentration on a limited number of niches. Through its issue brief on accreditation, the ECS (2000) dismissed any threat from the schools because “relatively few seek and obtain regional accreditation, the ‘seal of approval’ that would increase their credibility in the eyes of the general public and prospective students” (p. 3).

Perception also plays a role in how community colleges have reacted to proprietary schools. Bailey et al. (2001) found that many faculty held “traditional views” (p. 44) about the quality and breadth of proprietary school education, despite having little knowledge of the programs or students at these schools. Administrators had little awareness of the number of four-year schools awarding associate’s degrees. Given the diminished threat felt by community colleges, Bailey (2006) suggested it is not surprising that community colleges have not reacted by moving to a more focused approach. Instead, they appear to be taking on more missions, strengthening their focus on academic and general education.

However, one example of a community college employing the proprietary school approach did emerge from this review. Set to open within the City University of New York (CUNY) system in 2012, the unnamed college will have restricted enrollment into a limited number of technical programs, all of which will be full time and all of which will be tailored to workforce needs (Ashburn, 2010). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that soaring enrollment and low completion rates at CUNY lead to establishing this alternative college as a possible means to improving student outcomes.

According to Bailey (2006), the greatest potential threat from proprietary schools could be an indirect one. Restricted funding could force community colleges with limited resources to cater to traditional students with fewer academic and financial issues. Once the baby boom echo passes through the system, however, those colleges expecting nontraditional students to return to their classrooms may find the for-profits more firmly entrenched in the nontraditional sector. A second fiscal issue could arise from institutional funding cuts being offset by aid to students and from a shift from grants to

loans. Bailey noted that “for-profits are notorious for making sure their students take advantage of both the grants and loans for which they are eligible” (p. 107). Added Floyd (2005), government policy makers may start drawing comparisons between public and for-profit education in regard to student outcomes.

Summary

The rapid growth of the proprietary sector has prompted it to be viewed as an emerging force in higher education despite the still relatively small percentage of students they serve. Researchers attribute the re-emergence to the schools’ ability to meet the needs of the growing population nontraditional student population which are shaped by a number of market forces, including an increasingly globalized economy. At least two researchers predicted that this growth will continue in part due to a traditional sector that is not keeping up with changing constituent and market needs. The initial anxiety among community colleges created by the rapid proprietary school growth has abated, in part due to burgeoning community college student enrollments amidst unstable state funding and in part due to perceptions that proprietary schools offer a lower quality of education. Meanwhile, research indicates that proprietary schools pose no competitive threat due to their small enrollments, large tuitions, and limited programming focus.

The information in this section suggests that the proprietary sector is in touch with its constituency, supporting the need to examine processes that sustain this relationship. It also raises the possibility that this research may be seen by the community college community as lacking value, given this traditional sector’s limited understanding and near dismissal of proprietary schools. This possibility supported the decision to take the research directly to nontraditional proprietary school students, a population very similar to that of community colleges and the only population who truly knows whether and how their needs are being met.

Oversight

Because proprietary schools are generally looked upon as being “less than” when compared to traditional higher education, it is important to understand how and to what degree they are accountable. Proprietary schools operate “essentially under the same triad that oversees the private not-for-profit and public postsecondary sectors” (Kinser, 2006a, p. 111), consisting of the states, the federal government, and nongovernmental

accrediting bodies. Proprietary school advocates add the free-market economy as a fourth overseer (Ruch, 2001).

Federal regulation has perhaps played the greatest role in shaping the proprietary school of the 21st century, as demonstrated by the 1992 HEA which addressed abuses in the sector by setting standards aimed specifically at proprietary schools tied to federal student aid (See History section above). Floyd (2005) and Kelly (2001) suggest that proprietary schools are strongly motivated to comply with federal regulations because they fear more rigorous oversight. State licensing requirements, as described by Floyd and Kelly, tend to focus on consumer protection issues. Schools who do not abide by a state's minimum standards can be denied permission to operate in that state. States differ in how they administer regulations, with degree status commonly determining which agency will regulate them. In many states, degree-granting proprietary institutions are regulated through the same agency as not-for-profit colleges (Kinser, 2006a).

Accreditation is tied to federal law requiring that institutions be accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education in order for their students to receive financial aid (Floyd, 2005; Kinser, 2006a). Accrediting agencies are non-profit organizations that certify the quality of and assist in the improvement of institutions or programs (Foster, 2004). They may be regional or national. Almost all degree-granting, for-profit institutions and nearly half of all non-degree, for-profits are accredited (Kinser), yet only about 10 percent of for-profit, degree-granting institutions are regionally accredited (Floyd; Kelly, 2001). Therein may be found both a major strength and a major weakness of proprietary schools. National accreditation allows new degree programs to be rolled out more quickly—less than one year as opposed to two years for approval by regional accreditors (ECS, 2000; Floyd)—allowing a quicker response to market and student needs. It also means, however, that transfer of credits can be difficult or impossible. Regionally accredited institutions typically do not accept credits from nationally accredited colleges which “are often viewed as second-class citizens of the higher education community, while regional accreditation has been traditionally perceived as an indicator of quality and status” (Kinser, p. 99).

While the literature expounds little on the differences between the two types of accreditation, an ECS (2000) study of regional accreditors offers insight regarding how

their values may differ. The three most commonly identified obstacles to proprietary school regional accreditation were: (a) the lack of independent governing boards; (b) evaluator bias; and (c) academic program issues such as number of faculty and general education course offerings. As the report stated, "...because FPs [for-profits] tend to be nontraditional with regards to staffing, calendar and delivery, there is a 'cultural gulf' between FPs and traditional institutions, which undermines trust, the foundation of accreditation" (p. 7).

Outside of the triad stands one more entity to which proprietary schools must be accountable, according to Ruch (2001), who wrote, "At its best, the marketplace functions as a system of checks and balances in which good products and services are sustained by the buying public, while poor products and services eventually lose their markets to better competitors" (p. 143).

In summary, the proprietary sector of higher education is held accountable by the states, the federal government, accrediting bodies, and according to proponents, the free market economy. Whereas state regulations and accrediting agency standards can vary, federal regulations do not, and hold sway over all institutions of higher education that want to participate in federal student aid programs. While it may be argued that proprietary schools come and go, those who sustain do so under regulations that are in many ways similar to those imposed on traditional colleges.

Summary

Proprietary schools are unique institutions, particularly in regard to their business orientation. Yet their nontraditional enrollments and mission of workforce development represent striking similarities with community colleges. Combined with the sector's longevity, adaptability to increased regulation, and rapid growth, these similarities provoked an anxiety among community colleges that gave way to indifference once it was determined that the schools are not a competitive threat. Regardless of whether proprietary schools present a threat to community colleges, neither of these responses is constructive as they fail to recognize that proprietary school practices may hold valuable lessons for community colleges.

Student Success in Proprietary Schools

Despite sharing very similar student populations, proprietary schools produce overall better student outcomes than do community colleges. The literature suggests that this is because these schools practice very different institutional procedures, which will be explored in this section.

Outcomes

A comparison of the attainment rates of proprietary school and community college students reveals higher rates for proprietary schools. Berkner et al. (2000) studied degree attainment after three years for students who began postsecondary education in 1995-96, focusing on those who started in less-than-four-year institutions. Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 96/98), the NCES researchers determined that for-profits have higher and faster attainment rates. Attainment as defined by NCES means that the student completed a program and earned a degree, defined broadly as including certificates. Vocational certificates are often completed in a year, while associate's degrees take at a minimum two years to complete.

The majority (80 percent) of proprietary school students begin in vocational certificate programs while most students in public institutions (81 percent) enter associate's degree programs (Berkner et al., 2000). Despite this inverse relationship, proprietary schools outperform two-year public colleges in each type of program. Fifty-four percent of students who began in certificate programs at for-profit institutions had attained a certificate at the first institution attended, compared with 30 percent of those who began at public institutions after three years. Thirty-five percent of those who began in associate's degree programs had attained their degrees, as opposed to 7 percent at public institutions. For-profit students finished their degree in an average of 22 months, as opposed to 25 months for nonprofit students, and received certificates in 12 months, in contrast to 16 months for students at public institutions.

Viewing attainment from a different perspective, Bailey (2006) discovered that while they enrolled just 4 percent of the 6 million students at two-year institutions in 2002-03, proprietary schools accounted for 13 percent of the total degrees and certificates awarded by all two-year institutions. His findings, derived from NCES's Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) 2002-03, also showed the schools

granting 10 percent of the associate's degrees, even though they enrolled fewer than 4 percent of students who held the goal of earning an associate's degree.

The research points to full-time student attendance as a contributor to proprietary schools' student attainment rates. Berkner et al. (2000) acknowledged that 77 percent of the for-profit students in their study were full time during their entire enrollment, compared to 33 percent of students at public institutions. As previously mentioned, part-time enrollment has been found to have a negative relationship with persistence.

Full-time attendance appears to be the result of deliberate proprietary practices. First, many for-profits have programs taught in short terms or that allow continuous enrollment. This allows students to complete them more quickly, making the prospect of leaving employment to attend full time more feasible. Second, 96 percent of proprietary school students receive some type of financial aid, mostly in the form of federal grants or student loans, compared to 48 percent for two-year public college students (Wei, Berkner, He, & Lew, 2009). This provides perhaps an even stronger incentive for students to attend full time, stay enrolled, and focus on their studies. Higher financial aid participation is the result of a financial aid process that is fully integrated into the admissions process (Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Kelly, 2001). In her study on "enterprise colleges," Kelly found one college that had a financial aid specialist for every 125 students and reported that the local community college had one for every 1,000 students.

In summary, proprietary school students demonstrate higher and faster rates of program completion leading to a degree or certificate. The research indicates that these rates could be accounted for in part by the schools' high percentage of full-time students, which is facilitated by fast-track programs and a culture that emphasizes financial aid. These factors may well be viewed as evidence that proprietary schools have identified issues associated with student success, particularly among nontraditional students, and have implemented practices to address them.

Practices

In her case study on the factors accounting for proprietary school growth, Kelly (2001) asked why students would choose the for-profit sector when they could attend a good public university or community college for far less money. "The short answer," she determined, "is they meet students' needs" (p. 27). Practices that have been credited with

setting proprietary schools apart in meeting the needs of their students will be examined in this section. Proprietary schools are typically known for their customer service and convenience, a reputation supported by the research I located on their practices.

Student Services

Bailey et al. (2001) compared a for-profit chain with three community colleges geographically located near the branches of the chain. Through interviews with administrators, staff, and students and via classroom observations, the researchers found the greatest contrast to be in the area of student services, which were more integrated and focused at the for-profit school for all phases of the student's enrollment, from admissions to job placement. Kinser (2006b), in his study of student services operations of 17 proprietary colleges representing various sizes and types of ownership, found student services to be not only self-integrated, but inextricably connected with the mission of the institution. The institutions, he asserted, had "reconceptualized" (p. 275) student services from the traditional model by integrating them *with* rather than relegating them *to* the academic mission of the college.

Rosenbaum et al. (2006), who performed a comparison study of seven community colleges and seven private occupational colleges (four of which were for-profit) concluded that while community colleges view student success as a responsibility of the student, occupational colleges shift the responsibility to the institutions which "structure out" the need for the social know-how often lacking in nontraditional students by helping students "navigate the administrative obstacles of college" (p. 128). Their study consisted of interviewing 100 students and 100 administrators, surveying 4,365 students, and reviewing college materials. Person et al. (2006), writing on the same study, indicated that while community colleges provide more information, occupational colleges utilize structures that: (a) limit the need for information, (b) include mandatory advising around student schedules, and (c) place students in peer cohorts that provide information, support, and role models for success. The authors further noted that when community colleges follow similar structures—as with healthcare programs—"we find that their students' information is actually better than at occupational schools" (p. 392).

Kelly (2001) interviewed students at privately owned, publicly traded, and internet for-profit institutions about why they chose these institutions. Many students

were attracted to a particular school by a positive and prompt first contact. Structure and retention efforts were often cited as the benefits offered by the schools. Several students also noted that they had been unsuccessful at other institutions where “they had too many choices and too little advice” (p. 21).

The above-cited studies described student services in proprietary schools as accessible, proactive, and convenient. Processes such as enrollment, course selection, credit transfer, and financial aid are generally treated as a single process, counseling is simplified, and it is common for a student to be assigned a primary contact who will work with them throughout their enrollment (Bailey et al., 2001; Kinser, 2006b; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Services are easy to access through such practices as extended service hours and 24-hour live chat availability with an institutional representative. Further, rather than waiting on students to take the initiative to access services, the schools initiate contact to provide information “whether students know they need it or not” (Kinser, p. 274). They also may intervene when students underperform. Such action is facilitated in part by a faculty who is expected to identify and address student issues (Kinser; Rosenbaum, et al.), suggestive of an institution where departmental responsibilities overlap to accommodate student needs.

Curriculum Programming

Proprietary schools enroll a predominantly nontraditional student population who is seeking job skills that will lead to a job quickly. Therefore, accelerated programs are a major reason students choose to attend them (Kelly, 2001). In addition to an overall shorter program curriculum, proprietary schools generally have shorter terms and frequent entry and exit options, allowing students to blend study with work and family responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2001; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). The shorter, flexible terms allow students who may have to stop out, as is common among nontraditional students, to return to school quicker without a long gap in studies (Rosenbaum et al.). Further, because students are given a plan of study upon admission, often with a commitment to offer the courses necessary for timely graduation (Kinser, 2006b), they can organize their lives around predictable schedules, “rather than trying to fit ever-changing college course schedules into their already overburdened lives” (Rosenbaum et al., p. 227).

Little is mentioned in the literature about classroom instruction other than its practical, hands on application and the centralization of curriculum development (Bailey et al., 2001; Kelly, 2001). In fact, Kinser (2006a) claimed that “almost nothing is known about what happens in the for-profit classroom as opposed to what faculty training manuals and campus administrators claim is occurring” (p. 95). By interviewing students about proprietary school practices, this study addresses this gap in the research.

Mission as a Driver of Practices

The chief driver and facilitator of proprietary school practices is the career orientation of proprietary schools, where individual student success and career success are synonymous (Bailey et al., 2001; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). As Kinser noted, “helping students matriculate, stay enrolled, and graduate is the primary focus of student affairs” (p. 271). This narrow mission allows proprietary schools to focus on what will produce revenue, and that is the successful completion of students. This focus excludes some traditional services such as student activities, which seem to have less value for nontraditional students. Kelly’s student interviewees said that they did not have time for activities outside of their studies. Any extracurricular activity that does take place is most likely to involve job pursuit, which begins at enrollment when students declare a major and continues under the guidance of placement counselors (Rosenbaum et al.) throughout their college career.

Structure Versus Choice

Proprietary schools typically require students to select a major upon admissions while offering fewer programs to choose from than do community colleges. The students are expected to complete within established time limits and must participate in mandatory advisement to assure that they remain on track. Some observers have noted that this arrangement limits students’ ability to explore various careers and to explore options other than occupational training (Bailey, 2006; Person et al., 2006). Critics reason that proprietary schools are therefore only suited for students who know what they want to study. While this may be a valid argument, proprietary school proponents believe it must be weighed against the fact that more options can increase the need for information and may create confusion and wrong choices, prolonging students’ degree completion. Person et al. (2006) found that occupational college students reported receiving more

information, making fewer mistakes, and having greater confidence about degree completion as did community college students.

Summary

Student services and curriculum programming in proprietary schools have been described as being responsive to nontraditional student needs. Accessible and proactive student services which follow students throughout their school career and conveniences such as accelerated programs and predictable course scheduling are among the benefits cited by school officials and students alike. The literature described the schools as innovators that have “reconceptualized” student services and introduced structure to address student needs. There is a need to build on this research to determine which practices may actually impact student success. The data in this study resulting from in-depth conversations with nontraditional proprietary school students represent such research.

Summary

The literature suggests that proprietary schools produce higher student outcomes than do community colleges and has connected those outcomes to institutional practices. Those practices revolve around student services and curriculum programming. These connections have been drawn through observations, surveys, and interviews, both with school officials and the students themselves. Yet, in-depth interviews which take into account the context through which students experience these practices or which attempt to understand how each practice actually effects student success within that context have not been conducted. My study builds on the foundation provided by the existing research to address this gap through data resulting from in-depth conversations with nontraditional proprietary school students.

Community College Accountability

Considered the “equal access” sector of higher education and funded largely based on enrollment, community colleges have historically had little incentive to examine student outcomes (Brock et al., 2007). Yet today the focus has shifted from inputs to outputs, with accountability emerging as one of the major issues facing this sector of higher education (Cejda & Leist, 2006; Harbour & Jaquette, 2007; NCCC, 2008). The

current climate of accountability surrounding community colleges is examined in this section. This climate is viewed in light those forces which have brought it about, the emphasis on community college outputs, the challenges that community colleges face in trying to improve them, and the role of accountability as a potentially positive stimulus for change.

The Stimuli for Accountability

The literature credits myriad forces with bringing about greater attention to community college student outcomes, the most commonly mentioned being state legislatures (Bailey et al., 2006; Harbour & Nagy, 2005). Due to increased competition for state funding from sectors such as health care and corrections, legislatures responded by mandating performance accountability programs for higher education to justify their funding. As of 2003, nearly all states had some form of performance accountability, with 15 using set indicators to connect state funding to institutional performance. Forty-six states utilized performance reporting, which is not tied to funding and is considered less controversial (Burke & Minassians, 2003). Its purpose instead is to show colleges where they stand in meeting state priorities in order to promote institutional change for colleges who want to be viewed publicly as effective organizations (Burke & Minassians; Dougherty & Hong, 2006). Burke and Minassians (2001) suggested that the National Policy Center for Higher Education's (NCHE) annual state-by-state reports cards for higher education, begun in 1998, have stimulated interest in performance reporting. Among the categories NCHE rates are affordability, completion rates, and benefits of college.

The federal government has also contributed to the current accountability climate, generating legislation such as the 1997 Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act which requires colleges to report graduation rates. The accountability standards of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act spilled over into higher education (Bailey et al., 2005) as demonstrated by the 2006 report on U.S. higher education commissioned by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings which cited "a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students" (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], p. x.).

The increasing educational needs of a changing economy have also been

associated with the accountability movement. The College Board's NCCC (2008) called for greater accountability as community colleges' contribution to a "social contract" to keep America competitive in a knowledge- and global-based economy (p. 33). The report states that despite providing equal educational access and opportunity, community colleges "have been less adept at focusing on success, excellence and program completion..." (p. 10). The Spellings Report (USDE, 2006) states that in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, "higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance" (p. 21).

In summary, the current higher education accountability movement can be traced to various entities, among them being state governments, many of which have tied funding to performance due to decreasing state funds; and the federal government, which has tightened reporting requirements. The need to train a competitive workforce has resulted in organizations such as the College Board calling for community colleges to fulfill their "social contract" through greater accountability. Access is giving way to student success as the preferred measurement of accountability, which could have several implications for community colleges, including a need to seek out and implement new and innovative student success practices.

The Need for Accountability

The title of a recent volume of *New Directions for Community Colleges* asks a bold question: "Are Community Colleges Underprepared for Underprepared Students?" (Schuetz & Barr, 2008). Data from the literature points to the affirmative in answering this question.

Calculating from the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) Longitudinal Study of 1996-2001, CCRC researchers found that only 36 percent of all students had earned a certificate or an associate or bachelor's degree six years after entering college. While another 17 percent were still enrolled or had transferred to a four-year college, 47 percent were no longer enrolled. They further discovered that a substantial number of community college students with no credential or transfer outcome over the six-year study period had lower expectations of educational attainment than when they first enrolled. Half of those expecting an associate's degree and almost 60 percent of those expecting a certificate had lowered their expectations

(Bailey et al., 2005). Rosenbaum and Stephen (2005), looking at students who entered two-year colleges right after high school graduation, found that only 41 percent completed degrees (associate's or above) within eight years. Given that this group of students is likely more traditional, these data point to possibility even lower attainment rates for nontraditional students.

The first 27 community colleges joining the ATD initiative in 2003 reported equally weak outcomes. Between 29 and 37 percent of ATD college students who attempted the highest level of developmental math, English, or reading actually completed that course within a three-year period. Further, about 11 percent of students who started at their colleges in 2002 earned a credential or diploma within three years (Brock et al., 2007).

As dismal as these data appear, Schuetz and Barr (2008) suggested that student attrition rates are actually higher than these studies indicate because they do not account for those students who leave community colleges before the first official enrollment census. As many as one-fourth of beginning students leave community colleges during the period from enrollment to census date. They further lamented first-year retention rates that “have hovered near 50 percent for decades” (p. 10), resulting in a revolving door syndrome in which new students replace existing ones.

In summary, the literature indicates that community colleges demonstrate much room for performance improvement. As the accountability movement continues to shift toward outputs, community colleges will need to seek out ways to improve their performance levels. Proprietary schools represent one possible source of ideas.

Challenges in Meeting Performance Measures

Researchers concur that many of the challenges community colleges face in improving their performance lie within these institutions' very reason for being: to provide both open access and a comprehensive instructional program (Cejda & Leist, 2006; Dougherty & Hong, 2006; Harbour & Jaquette, 2007). Given that 89 percent of their students are nontraditional—defined as such by their risk for attrition—community colleges are disadvantaged by performance reporting systems that do not always distinguish them from four-year institutions, which have a much smaller proportion of nontraditional students (Dougherty & Hong; Harbour & Jaquette). Advocates question

why they should be “criticized for enrolling the very students they are expected to accept,” noting that many of the economic, social, and academic problems prevalent among community college students are “beyond the control of the colleges” (Bailey et al., 2005, p. 7). And despite enrolling students with the greatest barriers to their education, community colleges have the fewest resources to allocate to them, further impacting student success. In 2000-01, community college expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) student were 45 percent of those at four-year colleges (Bailey et al.).

Advocates also have issue with what they feel are inappropriate outcome measurements. Pointing to a diverse population with diverse needs, they argue that many of their students are not interested in graduating or transferring; rather, they may want to take only a few classes to pick up a specific skill or to simply sample college (Bailey et al., 2005; Dougherty & Hong, 2006). However, this objection does not address the fact that, according to BPS data, more than one-half of community college students who gave earning a certificate or degree as their reason for enrollment in 1996 had not completed any credential in 2001 (Bailey et al.).

Proponents also identify several issues with reporting Student Right to Know (SRK) data. First, the SRK completion rate uses a cohort of first-time, full-time students, atypical for community colleges where most students are part time and many are returning students. Second, the SRK rate—based on 150 percent of the expected completion time for programs—is too short for community college students because of their part-time status. Third, a student who transfers to another institution is virtually considered a “dropout” due to tracking limitations (Bailey et al., 2006; Dougherty & Hong, 2006).

Researchers agree that community colleges are hampered in meeting reporting criteria by internal constraints. They include a lack of resources in the collection of data, including understaffed institutional research offices and inadequate data collection and analysis tools. Moreover, administrators, staff, and faculty have yet to fully embrace outcomes-based research. (Morest & Jenkins, 2007; NCCC, 2008). The “silo” structure of various community college functions such as certificate and transfer functions contribute to the difficulty in tracking student outcomes (NCCC). Barr and Schuetz (2009) further suggested that community colleges admit to being underprepared and shift

data collection away from serving “our own institutional beliefs and needs” (p. 13) to asking the students about campus experiences that may interfere with their success.

In summary, accountability poses many challenges for community colleges. These challenges include a student population who is at high risk for not completing and who may not seek the outcomes that are being measured. Further, SRK inappropriately gauges success as it measures full-time students, uses a completion timeline that is too short, and does not adequately track transfer students. Finally, internal constraints, including a lack of resources, impact colleges’ ability to produce necessary data. Implications for practice resulting from this study take these challenges into account.

Accountability as an Opportunity for Improvement

Despite the difficulties that community colleges may face in improving performance, two important realities exist. First, it is unlikely that community colleges are satisfied with their outcomes; and second, some community colleges are more successful than others, indicating that the possibility for improvement exists (Bailey et al., 2005). Research demonstrates that performance improvement is possible and can be facilitated through the process of self-reflection.

In a study to determine why some colleges had a more positive effect on their minority students’ educational success, CCRC researchers put forth seven model elements they expected that the most effective colleges would employ and examined three high-impact and three low-impact colleges in Florida. Effectiveness was based on completion, transfer, and persistence. The clearest differences between the colleges fell under the element of “Targeted support for minority students,” specifically the subcategories of “Minority-inclusive campus environment” and “Specialized retention services for minority students.” All three high-impact colleges employed these strategies while none of the low-impact college did. Other notable differences were found in the elements of “Well-designed, well-aligned, and proactive student support services” and “Support for faculty development focused on improving teaching,” elements that none of the low-impact colleges practiced (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). A three-year follow-up of the study showed all of the participating institutions working to develop or enhance the model elements, indicating that “colleges can and do change the way they operate” (p. 4).

The CCRC study, which provoked colleges to examine their existing performance mechanisms, is evidence that change can result from self-reflection. The NCCC (2008) encourages community colleges to “continually reflect on and improve their policies and practices (p. 10), while “Achieving the Dream provides a way for colleges to engage in thoughtful self-assessment and reflection on how they can serve students better” (Brock et al., 2007, p. ix). Because “student goals and expectations are the product of social processes that interact with the factors that determine college outcomes” (Bailey et al., 2007, p. 3), self-reflection can only be gained by understanding student expectations within the context of student experiences.

In summary, despite their objections to increased accountability, community colleges can work to improve their student outcomes. This can be facilitated by a self-reflection process that includes learning about student expectations within student contexts. Such was the goal of this study, which provided this context by asking nontraditional students about their experiences with proprietary school practices and how those experiences may have affected their success in college.

Summary

Accountability is a challenge facing community colleges, one that has arisen through the forces of state and federal government and the changing educational needs of society. Increased accountability may be merited, given community college shortcomings in outcomes such as persistence and attainment. Community colleges face difficulties in improving these outcomes, including their large nontraditional student populations, a lack of funding, and possibly inappropriate outcome measurements. Nonetheless, researchers suggest that performance can be improved by understanding student expectations, the premise on which this research is based.

Summary of Review of Literature

Within this review of literature, proprietary schools have been established as a sector of postsecondary education that may offer potentially helpful lessons to other sectors, particularly community colleges. Proprietary schools and community colleges have in common a high percentage of nontraditional students, an at-risk population for whom proprietary schools report higher outcomes than do community colleges. At the

same time, an environment of accountability increasingly focused on outputs is facing community colleges.

A background on proprietary schools— inclusive of their history, their recent reemergence, and a mission shared by community colleges—laid the context for a greater understanding of a sector on which little research and much speculation has occurred. For example, research has connected proprietary school practices, particularly in the areas of student services and curriculum programming, with student success outcomes through practices which meet the needs of nontraditional students.

It is not suggested within this review of literature that proprietary schools are better than community colleges or are without shortcomings. As pointed out in the review, their tuitions are much higher, they offer fewer programs, and their credits are not usually transferable to public colleges. However, one should not dismiss the idea that these institutions, sharing student demographics and missions with and producing greater outcomes than community colleges, may hold lessons for community colleges.

Operationally, the research cited in this review of literature placed the study within the context of what is already known about how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of nontraditional students. Further, it created the basis for the conceptual framework of the proposed study, which is detailed in the next chapter, Design of Study.

CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF STUDY

Education is a life-changing event that carries a very personal and unique meaning for those who experience it. For this reason, I chose to conduct an interpretive study to examine how institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools may influence the success of nontraditional students. As van Manen (1987) stated, “The education process is not captured well by frequencies or statistical summaries. Process entails experience, and experience is best captured by narrative” (p. 6).

I begin this chapter with an overview of interpretive social science as the philosophical approach which guided my research from conceptualization through presentation. In keeping with this approach, which embraces the participatory role of the researcher (Patton, 2002), I offer a personal disclosure to explain how my personal frame of reference, including my experiences and perceptions, affected my approach to the research topic. I then introduce phenomenology, the interpretive method used in conducting the research study. Moving from the study’s philosophical framework, I conclude the chapter by examining the research processes undertaken, including the procedures of data collection and analysis and the strategies used to ensure soundness of the data and to protect study participants.

Philosophical Approach: Interpretive Social Science

The philosophical approach used in this study was interpretive social science. This research approach is defined by Neuman (2003) as “... the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (p. 76).

Individuals construct meanings so that they may interpret their social world, make sense of their lives, and take action. Because meaning drives social action, the purpose of interpretive social science is to understand social life by discovering how people construct meaning. Reality is what people perceive it to be, created “as people experience it and give it meaning” (Neuman, 2003, p. 77). There is, therefore, no single interpretive truth; rather, there are multiple “constructed realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). The concept of multiple realities represents perhaps the greatest distinction

between interpretivism and positivism, which assumes that reality exists “out there,” waiting to be discovered (Neuman, 2003, p. 72).

The primary concepts supporting interpretive social science are that: (a) meanings are intersubjective, or shared; (b) the process of collecting and interpreting meaning is inductive, allowing the phenomenon of interest to unfold naturally; (c) the researcher is a participant in the process; (d) the research takes place in the natural environment of the participants; and (e) rich description is the intended outcome. These concepts are interwoven under the overarching goal of interpreting and sharing meaning within its original context (Patton, 2002).

Among the strengths of interpretive research is the depth that occurs through the researcher going into the natural environment of the participants, becoming a participant observer, and facilitating a co-creation of understanding. A second strength is its inductive process which does not limit the researcher’s frame of reference in developing data collection and analysis procedures (Attinasi, 1990-91, p. 2). Rather, the interpretive researcher represents a conduit for the expression of meanings, recognizing the complexity of human behavior and allowing “those elements that make life conflictual, moving, problematic” to be captured (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 179). A third strength is that by focusing on the uniqueness that each of us brings to the human experience and giving voice to how meanings shape our actions, interpretivism speaks to human needs (van Manen, 1990).

Interpretive research is often criticized by positivists for its lack of objective validity standards. Interpretivists respond that validity occurs when those whose actions are being interpreted agree that they can understand the situation as the researcher has described it (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Further, as van Manen (1990) stated, “No single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complimentary, or even potentially richer or deeper description” (p. 31).

Lack of generalizability is also seen by positivists as a limitation of interpretive research. Interpretive social science promotes increased understanding over generalizability, allowing audiences to build upon their own prior and tacit knowledge. The researcher must provide sufficient descriptive data to make similarity judgments possible, while the audience determines its applicability. This process, which Lincoln

and Guba (1985) term “transferability,” is a function of the similarities between the “sending and receiving contexts” (p. 297). I believe that within the contexts of proprietary schools and community colleges are many similarities that make my research transferable, including the institutions’ predominantly nontraditional student enrollment and the types of programs that attract them to these institutions (Lee & Merisotis, 1990; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004).

The interpretive approach is more suitable for some research goals than others. By relating meanings that arise from experiences, it lends itself to studying processes, making this approach very appropriate to the study of proprietary school practices. As Patton (2002) explained, “the process *is* the point rather than simply the means of arriving at some other point” (p. 159). Interpretivism is appropriate for studying process because (a) depicting process requires detailed descriptions of interpersonal engagement, (b) the experience of process is different for different people, (c) it is impossible to capture fluid processes on a single rating scale at one point in time, and (d) participants’ perceptions are a key process consideration (Patton).

In summary, the purpose of interpretive social science is to understand social life by discovering how people construct meaning. As an approach well suited to studying process, interpretive study is applicable to exploring, through student perspectives, how proprietary school practices may impact the success of nontraditional students. Further, proprietary schools and community colleges share similar contexts that would allow for transferability of the proposed research. By building upon their understanding of nontraditional student meanings, institutions of higher education will be in a better position to make more informed decisions regarding improving student success.

Personal Disclosure

By the very knowledge forms we pursue and the very topics to which we orient ourselves, we do in fact show how we stand in life. (van Manen, 1990, p. 155)

As an interpretive researcher, I played the role of “human as instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39), interacting with my participants to co-create understanding. Throughout the collection and interpretation of the data, I practiced reflexivity, a process Lincoln and Guba (2000) describe as “a conscious experiencing of the self as both

inquirer and respondent, ... as the one coming to know the self within the process of research” (p. 183). My interpretation of reflexivity does not dictate that I set my values and beliefs aside or make apologies for them. Rather, I have embraced Gadamer’s (1982) belief these notions contribute to a constantly evolving historicity of understanding which should not and, in fact, cannot be cast aside in the process of understanding. My process of reflexivity therefore began with this personal disclosure to inform the reader of the values, beliefs and experiences that inspired my choice of topic and that have contributed to my interpretations resulting from the study.

This study, which examines through the perspectives of nontraditional students how proprietary school practices have influenced their success, reflects my passion for education. Education, an English professor once told me, is “the one thing that no one can ever take away from you.” I have an admitted bias against those who either do not take advantage of education or take it for granted and therefore do not take it seriously. Conversely, I have a strong affinity for those who, despite tough odds, attempt to better themselves through an education. My outlook derives at least in part from my own experiences as a nontraditional student. I entered community college from high school as a first-generation college student. I completed my master’s degree nearly a decade later as a single parent. I came into my research believing that my participants and I would have many experiences in common. As they relayed their stories to me, I realized that most had conquered much greater obstacles than I ever experienced.

My nearly 20 years of community college experience exemplifies Gadamer’s concept of an evolving historicity. Having worked in the areas of marketing, continuing education, and student services within the arena of community colleges, I have encountered countless nontraditional students facing major hurdles to realizing their educational goals. As a marketer, telling “student success stories” was the most fulfilling part of my job. As a continuing education administrator, I discovered a base of underserved students in need of marketable training. I took pride in developing fast-track, noncredit workforce development programs devoid of the traditional hurdles of credit curriculum. More recently, as an academic advisor, I came to realize that access does not equate to success and that most community college students will not achieve their

educational goals. I have also realized, as my study supports, that students feel more empowered if they know that someone at their institution has a genuine interest in them.

In exploring my continuum of higher education experience, I can see that my professional bias in the last two decades has evolved from extolling the benefits of open access education to questioning whether community colleges are promoting student success as diligently as student access. Accompanying this transformation is my growing sense of social justice as it pertains to education. This is best described in the words of French Enlightenment figure, the Marquis de Condorcet:

To ensure that everyone has the facility to perfect his occupation, to enable him to perform the social functions that he endeavors to exercise, to have opportunity to develop the whole range of his natural gifts and to establish thereby in actuality the equality of all citizens...should be the first objective of national education. (as cited in Tennant, 2005)

My assumptions regarding proprietary schools continued to be formed in the co-creation of understandings with my participants. As a community college employee, I often found myself in lockstep with the allegations that proprietary schools are little more than drive-by operations that offer subpar education at inflated costs to students. My research, on the other hand, has reintroduced me to these schools as institutions that, despite a bottom-line motive, can have students' best interests in mind and the results to prove it.

I chose to conduct an interpretive study for three reasons. First, this holistic approach honors the complexities of nontraditional students. Secondly, use of this approach will inform policy makers through the perspectives of the people for whom policy is created. Finally, I like to tell other people's stories. As Patton (2002) noted, the interviewer's task is to be invited into the world of the person being interviewed. As a former journalist and marketer, I was personally fulfilled when my interviewees candidly shared their experiences with me, and was honored when readers told me they were in some way moved by these stories. I honestly do not know if anyone beyond my dissertation committee will read the stories of the six participants in my study. I do know that their stories have changed how I view nontraditional students and their meanings of college success such that my next mission as a community college administrator will be to work toward the improvement of nontraditional student retention.

Research Method: Phenomenology

The method I used in conducting my interpretive research was phenomenology, which describes the meaning of lived experiences for individuals so that others may understand the essence of the phenomenon experienced. By focusing on the essence, or underlying meaning of an experience, phenomenology hopes to show how complex meanings can derive from experiences that are often typified as everyday life. It does this by transforming lived experience into a textural expression of its essence (van Manen, 1990). What should be common to all phenomenological description, according to van Manen, is that it causes the reader to share the researcher's curiosity about the phenomenon, with the reader grasping its nature and significance in a way not seen before.

Specifically, this study used the hermeneutic branch of phenomenology as advanced by Gadamer (1982). He asserted that a phenomenon should not merely be described, but interpreted, a process that is inseparable from understanding. This is made possible by a "fusion of horizons" (p. 273), by which the existing views of the researcher and the participant come together to form new understandings.

Hermeneutics originated in the 1700s as the study of the interpretation of texts, including the Bible (Carr & Kemmis, 1986); today the concept of "text" includes discourse and even action. Research takes the form of a conversation about the human life world, with the oral discourse becoming the texts to be interpreted. Because the interview text is interpreted as it is created, there is a negotiated interpretation of the text (Kvale, 1996). This process distinguishes hermeneutics from pure phenomenology, in which the researcher is expected to be free of presuppositions. In addition to viewing conversation as a conduit to understanding, the canons of hermeneutic phenomenology include the use of the hermeneutic circle, a spiral process through which the meaning of individual parts of the text (or conversation) are continuously related back to the whole in order to continuously deepen understanding. This iterative process ends when the researcher has arrived at an interpretation free of contradictions (Kvale).

The phenomenon studied was the role that proprietary school practices may have in influencing the success of nontraditional students. The intention in using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was twofold: (a) to deepen understanding of

how participants give meaning to success, and (b) to interpret their meanings to understand what practices may be contributing to their success and how they are doing so. This method takes into account how historically affects participants' present meanings, which is particularly relevant for nontraditional students who are likely to have past experiences that can affect their success in college. As Gadamer (1982) stated, "the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past (p. 273). Against the backdrop of so many roles, nontraditional students have ever-changing horizons. Through the "fusing of horizons," or understanding their perspectives, community colleges can bridge the gap between good intentions to serve nontraditional students and strategies relevant to the educational needs that they possess.

In summary, the method used for this study was phenomenology, which describes individuals' meanings of their lived experiences in a way that allows others to understand the essence of those experiences. I employed the particular method of hermeneutic phenomenology which, in suggesting that the existing views of the researcher and the participant come together to form new understandings, complements my belief that all individuals process information against existing beliefs that are constantly evolving through experience and interaction.

Research Procedures

Interpretive research creates understanding through multiple viewpoints. The procedures that were used to understand proprietary school practices' impact on college success from the perspectives of a diverse group of nontraditional students are addressed in this section. First, the process of site selection, inclusive of the criteria considered and the procedures used in securing a study site, is described. Then, the participant selection process is similarly described, including selection criteria and procedures and the rationale for the selected number of participants. Processes for data collection and interpretation are then detailed. Finally, strategies to ensure soundness of the data and protection of study participants are explained.

Site Selection

The criteria for and procedures used in selecting a study site that would be relevant, “information rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 230), and accessible are outlined in this section.

Criteria

The goal of this research was to identify proprietary school practices that may positively impact the success of nontraditional students and that may be applicable to the community college setting. Consequently, primary site selection criteria were based on the chosen site sharing similarities with community colleges, as follows:

1. The site for this study was a proprietary school offering certificates of technology and associate’s degrees.
2. The site offered programs that are common in both proprietary schools and community colleges.
3. The site was nationally accredited, a mark of adherence to U.S. Department of Education standards.
4. The site had a program with an enrollment size comparable to that of a community college available for participant selection.
5. The site had student certificate program completion rates exceeding the national average for those of community colleges.

In addition, I sought out an institution that was affiliated with a company that operates multiple campuses, indicating an adherence to a structure in policy and practice that may not be present in independently operated schools.

From the outset of creating the research design for this study, it was determined that one study site would be used, the rationale being that: (a) Working through institutional channels to gain access to the campus and its students would be time-intensive; (b) accessing the appropriate number of participants for interpretive research would be possible; and (c) interpreting different meanings regarding the same institution would emphasize the role of meaning making, which is central to interpretive research.

Procedures

Proprietary schools are noted for not being easily accessible to researchers (Berg, personal communication, July 9, 2009; Kinser, personal communication, July 10, 2009). Therefore, a realistic goal was to locate one proprietary school that would allow access to its students, as well as its staff and relevant documents. The site was selected with the aid of the proprietary school coordinator for the Texas Workforce Commission, which regulates proprietary schools in the state of Texas. After reviewing the commission's list of Texas licensed career schools and colleges online and determining which met my criteria in terms of credentials awarded, programs offered, and location, I requested from him the most recent completion, placement, and employment data for these schools. These data allowed me to identify programs with enrollments similar to what I would find in a similar program at a community college and with completion rates exceeding the average for community college technical programs. The website for each potential college was checked for accreditation status.

As was expected, gaining access to a proprietary school was time and labor intensive. A month-long waiting period ensued upon seeking access to the first proprietary school I contacted. I spoke with a campus president and followed up with written information about the study, which she then forwarded to the corporate level. The response was, "They do not want you talking to our students." The second proprietary school I contacted turned out to be the site that I would study after a two-month-long waiting period for corporate approval. To its credit, corporate office staff apparently had not received the information the campus president had forwarded in my behalf. Once that was resolved, the approval came almost immediately. In the interim, I had contacted a third proprietary school president who said there should be no problem gaining corporate approval. He never reported back to me.

The college that I selected—and that selected me—is referred to in this dissertation as Career Tech. As co-determined with the president, the program of study from which participants were selected was Medical Assisting, an eight-month certificate program. Career Tech and its Medical Assisting program will be described in Chapter 5.

Participant Selection

Because I set out to achieve an in-depth understanding about the impact of proprietary school practices from the nontraditional student perspective, purposeful sampling was used to select nontraditional students who had experienced Career Tech practices and were successful in college. A description of the criteria and procedures used in participant selection follows.

Criteria

All study participants were required to possess two or more NCES nontraditional college student criteria, making them either moderately or highly nontraditional and likely more experienced with related issues than nontraditional students possessing a single criterion. Those criteria are: (a) delayed enrollment, (b) attends part-time, (c) is financially independent, (d) is employed full time, (e) has dependents, (f) is a single parent, and (g) does not have a high school diploma (has GED or did not finish high school) (Choy, 2002). The following additional criteria were used in the selection process:

1. Participants were enrolled in Career Tech's medical assisting certificate program.
2. Participants had completed at least 75 percent of the program by the time of the second interview and final interview.
3. Participants had experienced the phenomenon of proprietary school practices.
4. Participants were willing and able to communicate their experiences such that they would contribute to a rich, thick description of how proprietary school practices may have contributed to their college success.

Persistence was used as a criterion because students closer to completion should have: (a) developed a sense of what success in college means to them and (b) experienced practices that they feel have contributed to that success. Because the program is eight months in length, participants had to have completed the sixth month, or module, to meet the 75 percent completion criterion for the study.

Six participants were interviewed for this study. The decision on how many participants to interview was derived largely from Seidman's (1991) primary criteria for determining the number of participants: (a) whether the number provides adequate

representation of the phenomenon to persons outside of the sample, and (b) at what point additional participants would make the data redundant. Further, my goal was to interview from a diverse sample, because as Patton (2002) explained, diversity of participants adds greater significance to any shared patterns that might emerge.

Initially, I planned to interview no fewer than four participants, with the possibility of increasing the number to eight. Common themes emerged freely from the interviews with the first three participants, leading me to believe that the data was becoming redundant and that four participants would adequately represent the phenomenon of proprietary school practices' impact on nontraditional student success. The fourth participant shared many meanings with the first three, but the essence of her experiences with proprietary practices differed significantly. I therefore decided to interview two more participants, the first of whom described some of her experiences similarly to the fifth participant and some similarly to first three. The second additional participant expressed the essence of her experiences more similarly with those of the first three participants. With no new data resulting from the final two participants, I decided to limit the number to six.

Recruitment Procedures

At the invitation of Career Tech's president and its allied health chairperson, who was my designated contact at the college, I visited one daytime and one evening medical assisting class to inform students about the study and to recruit potential participants. The recruitment tool was a one-page Research Applicant Information Form (Appendix A), which was distributed to every student. To assure confidentiality, every student was asked to return their form. If they were not interested in participating, rather than completing the form they could write "no" at the top of the page.

The information collected on the form served as the primary tool for participant selection. Sections on the form were: (a) Contact Information (name, phone and email); (b) Personal Information, (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, employment status, and college education prior to Career Tech); (c) Program Information, (enrollment status by module and daytime or evening attendance), and (d) Student Services, which asked students to choose from a list students services the ones they had used at Career Tech.

Prior to distribution, the form was shared with administrators, who suggested minor changes, including to ask specifically “What program month are you in” to better identify participants in the final 75 percent of the program. This was necessary because each of the classes I visited consisted of Modules 4 through 7 in the eight-month program. Module 8 is the externship. Minor suggestions were also made for the Student Services section, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

A total of 39 forms were returned, with 32 students indicating an interest in participating. Among those, 18 were in the sixth, seventh or eighth (externship) module. Of those 18, two did not meet the nontraditional qualifications, leaving 16 potential participants initially. Information from the form was then used to develop a spreadsheet of students in Modules 6, 7 and 8, from which applicants were selected. Module 6 students were included because they would become eligible to participate the following month as Module 7 students.

The primary information used to qualify students as possible participants were their nontraditional student status and their length of time in the program. Also, because the focus of the study was on proprietary school practices, attention was given to those students who had used the greatest number of student services. I then considered their ethnicity, age, marital status, attendance time (day or evening), prior education, and employment as a means of trying to establish diversity among participants. Gender was not considered since all but two respondents were female and one male did not meet nontraditional qualifications. Table 7, showing a demographic composite of the participants, reveals a sample group that is particularly diverse in age and ethnicity. An effort was made to better diversify the group by attendance time, but many attempts to recruit evening students failed due to inaccurate contact information or students’ unwillingness to participate once contacted. Pseudonyms were given to each participant for the purposes of anonymity and will be introduced in Chapter 4 in the participant profiles. Here, each participant is assigned a number.

Table 7
Participants by Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristic	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Gender						
Female	x	x	x	x	x	x
Age						
18-23			x			
24-34	x					x
35-44		x		x	x	
Marital status						
Single	x		x			
Married					x	x ^a
Divorced/separated		x		x		
Ethnicity						
Caucasian				x	x	x
African-American	x	x				
Hispanic			x			
Daytime student	x	x		x	x	x
Evening student			x			
Previous college				x		x
Employment						
Full time	x					
Part time				x		x ^b

^aThis was the participant's marital status when the form was collected. She became separated during the interview period. ^bThis was the participant's employment status when the form was collected. Her employment ceased prior to the interviews.

The nontraditional student traits of the participants at the time they completed the Research Applicant Information Form appear in Table 8. Since all students attended Career Tech full time, the nontraditional trait of attends part-time is not included. Three participants were moderately nontraditional by virtue of having two or three nontraditional traits. Three participants, with four or more nontraditional traits, were highly nontraditional.

Table 8

Participants by NCES Nontraditional Characteristics

Characteristic	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Had dependents	x	x	x	X	x	x
Delayed enrollment	x	x	x	X	x	
Financially independent	x	x		X	x	x
Single parent	x	x	x	X		
No HS diploma		x		X		
Worked full time	x					

Data Needs and Collection Techniques

The interview was the primary method of data collection for this study, a process which commenced after data needs were identified. Though the development of three overarching research questions, proprietary school practices were identified as the phenomenon to be understood. Interview questions were then created as the tool for generating the data needed in order to understand these practices (Maxwell, 2005). Table 9 illustrates the relationship between the research questions and some of the interview questions. The entire list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Table 9

Research Questions and Their Related Interview Questions

Research question	Interview question
What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?”	<p>What was it that made you decide to go to college?</p> <p>How did you come to choose medical assisting as your program of study?</p> <p>What does college success mean to you?</p> <p>How do you think your definition, or meaning of college success was formed?</p> <p>Have you experienced college success thus far, and if so, how?</p>
What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of moderately to highly proprietary school students?	<p>Of those student services that you have used at Career Tech, which ones do you use most frequently and why? Tell me about your experiences with these services at Career Tech.</p> <p>Which instructional practices of your education are most important to you and why? Tell me about your experiences with these practices at Career Tech.</p> <p>How do you most frequently receive information from the college? Which sources do you feel are most effective and why?</p>
How do these practices work to impact the success of moderately to highly nontraditionally proprietary school students?	<p>Which, if any, student services have impacted your success as a college student? How? (This same question was asked regarding instructional practices and information-sharing practices.)</p> <p>Reflecting back on your experiences overall as a college student, were you made to feel by the college that you would be successful? If so, how?</p> <p>How has the success you have experienced in college impacted your life thus far?</p>

Interview Procedures

Data were gathered primarily through interviews with six nontraditional proprietary school students. I wanted to understand (a) what college success meant to these students while they were experiencing it and (b) whether and how these students would connect that success to proprietary school practices.

The process began with a telephone call to each student upon my selection of her as a potential participant. I identified myself, restated the purpose of the study, and asked the student if she was still willing to participate. If so, I asked if she would be willing to openly discuss her experiences as a nontraditional proprietary school student and to commit up to 2 ½ hours to the process under the provision that her confidentiality and that of the school would be honored. Once a final verbal acceptance was obtained, I scheduled the initial interview.

I used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection technique. Delimiting the subject areas allowed me to use interview time more effectively while having the flexibility to build a conversation within a particular subject area. It also lessened the potential for an overload of extraneous information which could compromise the data analysis. Each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions in order to: (a) establish the context of the participants' experiences, (b) allow participants to reconstruct in detail their experience within the context in which it occurred, and (c) encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences held for them (Seidman, 1991). Further, I wanted to establish a rapport and trust with the students, which I felt could not be done in a single interview.

The first interview focused on participants' meanings of college success and also included questions to help me better understand the participants as nontraditional students. For example, I asked whether they considered themselves to be nontraditional students and, if so, why.

The second interview was devoted to participants' experiences with proprietary school practices. With three areas of practices to be examined, participants were provided a visual aid in the form of a written questionnaire listing practices in sections: (a) Student Services, (b) Instruction, and (c) Information (see Appendix C). The Student Services section duplicated the completed Student Services section on their Research Applicant Information form, serving as a reminder of those services they originally indicated that they had used and to give them the opportunity to confirm their choices. The Instruction section listed instructional practices and asked participants to rank them in importance. The Information section listed common means of institutional communication and asked students to indicate whether they had been exposed to them at

Career Tech. For all three areas, participants were asked to describe their experiences at Career Tech and were given the opportunity to discuss additional practices that may have not been listed on the questionnaire. This process is revisited in Chapter 5 and tables expressing participant response to each area of practice are presented.

The tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology guided the interviews for this study. First, I maintained an attitude of openness and respect toward my participants. Second, questions were geared toward acquiring new information, rather than substantiating my own views. Third, I used the interviews as an opportunity to clarify as well as question. I took into account that the participants might have limited, if any, experience being interviewed. Therefore, I informed them at the outset of the interviews that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that if they felt uncomfortable with any question, they could either choose not to answer it or we could return it later in the conversation. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they had any additional comments or questions.

Complementary Data Collection Techniques

Because there are limits to how much can be learned by what people have to say, I closely observed the participants as I listened to them. This gave me a better understanding of the participants and allowed me to adjust my approach with each one in an attempt to make them feel most comfortable, as in the case of Juanita, whose travel arrangements made her late to both meetings. Since settings can influence an individual's mindset, I had hoped to interview each participant once at Career Tech and once at one other location. This was suggested to participants but not mandated. Three participants chose off-campus locations for the second interview. However, gauging these interviews against the first set and against those students who interviewed on-campus both times, I noted no significant differences in their demeanor or their openness toward me.

Institutional documents and materials, including Career Tech's website, student catalog/handbook, promotional materials, and student data, were examined for information relevant to the study (see Appendix D for complete list). The CEO of the company and campus directors in the areas of allied health, recruitment, career services, and financial services were interviewed so that I would have a basic understanding of the

college's operating principles. I also attended an orientation session and the college's fall commencement ceremonies and made observations of the physical campus to augment my research. In addition, I made it a point to observe Career Tech as an educational environment, inclusive of the facilities and the interactions which occurred within them.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an iterative process in which the researcher is constantly relating new data to what is already known. Patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge from the data through the process of inductive analysis (Patton, 2002) and are then constructed into meaningful wholes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is to produce a study that reveals "a relational unfolding of meanings" (Kvale, 1996, p. 226). To this end, I found myself listening to interview recordings, reviewing observation notes, reading transcripts, and journaling repeatedly in a multidirectional fashion, picking up new insights with every turn taken. An attempt will be made here to delineate what I would describe as an adventure, rather than a process.

1. In keeping with the tenets of interpretive research, I started analyzing data as it was being shared with me. During the interviews, I made notes from my observations and wrote down questions that surfaced as being possibly relevant to continued discovery and analysis.
2. As soon as possible after each interview, I compiled interview notes and transcribed the interviews. Separate transcripts were created for each of the two interviews conducted with each participant because each interview addressed specific research questions. Every interview was listened to twice in its entirety and additionally in parts as necessary to assure accurate transcription.
3. Concurrently, for each participant a summary of the two interviews was drafted in order to capture the totality of how she experienced the essence of the phenomenon. (This summary was also shared with participants. See the section, Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Data.)
4. Units of meaning relative to the research questions were noted on each transcript after no fewer than three readings. Emerging patterns among these units of meaning were then categorized into two sets of themes for each

participant: (a) their characteristics as a nontraditional student and (b) their meanings of college success.

5. Concurrently, individual profiles were developed, inclusive of descriptions and meanings which led to the development of the themes.
6. As these last two processes were repeated from newly transcribed interviews, the individual themes were continuously compared with those from previous transcriptions in order to develop two composite sets of themes for all participants.
7. A synthesis was created to illustrate a relationship between participants' nontraditional student characteristics and their meanings of college success.
8. Finally, a second synthesis linked participants' meanings of success to the practices they identified as contributing to their success.

Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Data

In interpretive research, we can only claim truth to the extent that our participants agree that we got it right. Yet we can prove that our research is valid by employing strategies to ensure soundness of data throughout all stages of the research process (Kvale, 1996). The strategies that I used considered the perspectives of the researcher, the participants, and the readers of the study (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

From the researcher's perspective, it was important that I practiced reflexivity, which began with the Personal Disclosure section of this proposal. I also practiced triangulation by supplementing my interviews with observations of the students and Career Tech and with review of documents and materials. Further, multiple interviews allowed me to follow up on questions that may have emerged after I reviewed my notes and transcripts from the first interview. Keeping a personal journal allowed me to reflect on the research process and on myself as a researcher. I recorded realizations and ideas and attempted to note any common understandings that evolved through the process. Journaling was also therapeutic for me as I encountered challenges such as the resignation of the Career Tech president with whom I had initiated the research, not being able to contact some of the students I wanted to interview, and dealing with occasional no-shows. Securing such frustrations on the written page prevented them from entering the interactive research process.

In consideration of participant needs, it was very important that I earned their trust if I wanted to collect authentic data. This process began with open classroom presentations at which all potential participants were present. Multiple interviews using a semi-structured, conversational approach allowed me to build a relationship with each participant. It was also important that participants' meanings were interpreted accurately. Therefore, member checking was used to confirm intersubjective understanding. After transcribing the recordings of both interviews with each participant, I developed an interview summary, which I emailed to the participants for their review. This document included a description of each participant and, for each of the primary questions asked, a summary of her answers, and supporting quotes from the interviews. This was done within a two-week period while the interviews were fresh on the participants' minds. Participants, who were also offered an opportunity to review the entire transcripts, responded either in person or via email.

Important to the reader is that rich, thick description is used so that they see the phenomenon as a possible human experience. I asked my peers to read the findings chapters, which included participant profiles, to determine if I had achieved this goal. I also created documentation of all research decisions and activities through journaling, memoing, and recording data analysis procedures clearly, as noted above. I also kept a research log of all activities.

Strategies to Protect Human Subjects

In order to protect the participants in this study, comprehensive procedures were followed throughout the research process. Prior to proposing this research to my dissertation committee, I completed Oregon State University's online course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects (CITI). Upon committee approval of the proposal, I sought and obtained approval from the college's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I followed Oregon State Human Subjects policy for the duration of the study.

Onsite interviews were held away from the college's medical assisting classroom/lab area to aid in anonymity. Each participant read, signed, and received a copy of the Informed Consent Document immediately preceding the first interview. This process was facilitated by a portable copier that I brought to the interview room. They were encouraged to ask any questions they had the study or about my role as researcher.

Pseudonyms were used to identify participants both during data collection and within the text of the dissertation. As previously noted, a pseudonym was also used for the study site. I kept all data regarding the research confidential as agreed to in the informed consent documents.

Summary

Working within an interpretive philosophical approach, this study used the method of hermeneutic phenomenological to describe the relationship between proprietary school practices and nontraditional student college success. Interviews with six moderately to highly nontraditional students from one study site, Career Tech, were the primary method of data collection for this study. Methods used to ensure soundness of the data included conducting multiple interviews with participants, triangulation through complementary data collection measures, and member checking to confirm intersubjective understanding.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS' MEANINGS OF COLLEGE SUCCESS

As I reflected upon the interviews I conducted with the participants in this study, I was reminded that who these six individuals were as nontraditional college students formed the basis for how they defined college success. This chapter therefore serves two purposes: (a) to introduce the six participants, inclusive of lived experiences that helped shape their identity as nontraditional proprietary school students; and (b) to provide data analysis to answer the first research question, What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?” Building on this foundation, proprietary school practices that were identified by participants as impacting their college success will be presented in Chapter 5, hence answering the second and third research questions.

The data for this chapter derive primarily from the first of two interviews held with each participant. During this interview, I asked a set of context-building questions that would allow me to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and motivations of the participants as nontraditional college students. The conversation then explored how participants understood and experienced college success. Accordingly, individual participant profiles describe the lived experiences that contributed to participants' status as nontraditional college students, the meanings that they assigned to the experience of college success, and how they viewed their own success within the context of being a nontraditional student. From each of the six profiles emerged two sets of individual themes: (a) nontraditional student characteristics and (b) meanings of college success.

The research question, What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?”, is addressed in the second section of this chapter using the themes which emerged from the participant profiles. This occurs through a three-step process. First, individual nontraditional student characteristics are synthesized into a collective set of common themes and analyzed. Then, the same process is conducted for the meanings of college success themes. These two processes provide the context for the third step, which connects the two sets of themes to establish a relationship between nontraditional student characteristics and the meanings of college success.

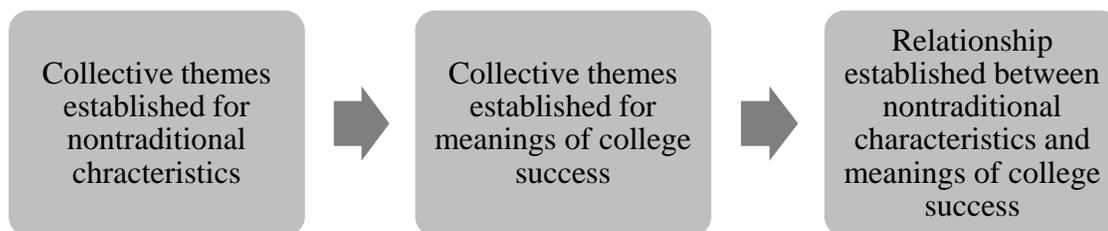


Figure 2. Flow chart showing the process of establishing a relationship between participants' nontraditional characteristics and their meanings of college success.

Profiles of Participants

The six nontraditional proprietary school students who participated in this research are profiled in this section. By providing insight into their lived experiences, the profiles reveal the perspectives that each one brought to the study and lend credence to those commonalities shared among distinct personas. Information in this section is drawn from: (a) the participants' completed Applicant Information Form (see Appendix A), (b) participant interviews, and (c) observations made during the interviews.

Participants are profiled independently. Following a brief introduction based primarily on the participant's NCES nontraditional characteristics, each profile is divided into two major sections. Within the first section is a description of each participant relative to being a nontraditional college student, developed from my observations and her responses to questions related to her attitudes, beliefs, and motivations as a nontraditional student. A table listing the participant's individual nontraditional student themes is then presented. The second section of each profile is devoted to each participant's meanings of and experiences with college success as shared with me during our conversations. A table conveying the individual college success themes follows.

Participants were ensured a level of confidentiality. In keeping with that obligation, the participants' names and the name of the institution they attended were intentionally not cited. Each participant was given the opportunity to self-select a pseudonym, which three of them did. If they declined, a pseudonym was selected for them. "Career Tech" is being substituted for the name of the college they attended. In keeping with the methodology of phenomenological research, quotes are used liberally so as to preserve the context of the meanings participants shared with me.

Participant 1: Susan

Susan is an African American female who, during my interviews with her, was 27 years of age and in the seventh module (equivalent to seven months) of the eight-month medical assisting program. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, (b) was a single mother, (c) had delayed college at least one year after high school, (d) worked full time, and (e) was financially independent. Susan attended daytime classes at Career Tech and entered her externship the day following our second interview. She was employed as a certified nurse aide (CNA) at a home health care agency. She had a son who was 4 years of age during our interviews.

Susan was interviewed twice: once at Career Tech and once at a fast-food restaurant near her home. The interviews were held 16 days apart and lasted a total of 1 ½ hours. Susan was the first student I selected and scheduled, but was not the first to be interviewed. Both interviews had to be rescheduled due to last-minute conflicts that arose for her.

Background

For our first appointment, held at the school, Susan arrived a few minutes late from having taken a test in class. The white disposable lab coat she wore brought out her rich, brown skin, which was punctuated by vibrantly painted lips. She donned perfectly spaced cornrows and her makeup was immaculately applied. Yet, despite a physical appearance suggestive of an outgoing personality, I found Susan to be demure and unassuming. She smiled politely but looked downward as we shook hands. When I asked her about a pseudonym, she suggested Susan Doe, as if there was nothing remarkable about her.

During our ensuing conversation, Susan made eye contact for short periods of time, keeping any facial expressions or gestures in check. She sat up straight in her chair with both feet planted firmly on the floor. She held her arms close to her body, with her hands clasped on top of the desk as though she was a student being respectful of her instructor in class. She was a person of few words who spoke with a bit of a Southern drawl and whose grammar was poor. She answered most questions in literal, concrete

terms, preferring tangibles over opinion. When asked how college may have changed her as a person, she confined her answer to her acquisition of new skills. Her infrequent laughter, rather than expressing humor, seemed to signal acceptance of life circumstances such as having to pay back her student loans.

Susan described her life as “just work and school.” She attended Career Tech Monday through Thursday, from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and worked Monday through Friday from 3:00 to 11:00 p.m. Residing some 30 miles from Career Tech, she was also spending over an hour each day on the road. Her decision to attend college and endure this grueling routine was fueled by a need to better provide for herself and her son. Having been a CNA for seven years, she also had a personal desire to pursue a more challenging career. “I’m bettering myself, trying to move up, to step ahead a little bit,” Susan explained.

As Susan described her decision-making processes regarding her field of study, it became clear that she was a pragmatist. For example, she explained that becoming a medical assistant would mean better pay and swapping basic duties such as dressing and feeding patients for skills such as taking vital signs, drawing blood, and giving injections. It would also make her more marketable in the workplace.

So with me having a CMA *and* a CNA, that I can switch between both, they [hospitals] can probably hire me for medical assistant and then if they[’re] short on the floor, as a CNA, then I can go do CNA work and then switch from both positions.

She felt that the hands-on training she would receive at Career Tech would facilitate the transition. “Me, I’m more of a hands-on than I am with bookwork,” she said.

Susan seemed remarkably low-key regarding her grinding lifestyle, even as she described her daily routine of “school, leave school, go to work, get off, get up and do it again the next day.” When asked if she considered herself to be a nontraditional student by virtue of her many responsibilities, she simply replied, “I’m just average. Just average.” Yet, despite having adapted to her school/work routine by the time I interviewed her, Susan had doubts early on that she would be able to sustain the pace that both endeavors required.

It was hard getting up, with me getting off at 11 the prior night and then having to get up at 7 the next morning trying to make it here [Career Tech]

on time for class at 8. It was hard and I was saying to myself that I don't think that I can do it.

In addition to the time element, switching her focus between work, school, and her son was difficult and her early grades reflected this conflict. Susan also felt that being away from school a few years had impacted her study skills. "...it's harder for me now 'cause I waited, ... but um, as guess far as thinking, you know, I've lost some of my thinking," she said. Any thoughts of dropping out, however, were eclipsed by Susan's sense of rationality.

I was wantin' to kind of stop coming, but ... then if I wudn't going to come, I'm going to still have to be, uh, ...my name's still on the paperwork, the contract. I still signed the grant (small laugh). Still, you know, pay off the loan after school and if I wudn't gonna come, the loan was going to still have to be paid. So I decided I just gotta' make myself do it.

With time, Susan's body adapted to the routine, and the longer she persevered, the better her grades became. She reasoned that as she progressed in the program that more would be expected of her and that she would have to work harder to achieve a goal that was becoming nearer and nearer. "So I'm real proud of myself for still hanging in there," Susan said. "... it was hard at the beginning but now, since I'm almost to the end, I'm doing better."

The following themes emerged in regard to Susan's status as a nontraditional college student:

- Needed better career as single parent
- Was tired of current job, wanted different career
- Saw medical assisting as a logical step up from CNA
- Wanted to better herself
- Her learning style was hands-on
- Did not think she could do it
- Her life was "just work and school"
- Busy lifestyle made it difficult to focus on college
- Delaying college affected her thinking
- Her grades improved over time

Meanings of Success

Because she experienced doubts that she had what it took to remain in the program, success to Susan meant that she had done just that. She defined success not as something she *had* achieved, but as something she *was* achieving. During our first interview, she said that success was "basically what I'm doing now, trying to succeed and

to go as far as what I'm trying to reach for." Reflective of her low-key style, Susan said that her success up to that point was not the result of doing anything extraordinary, but rather doing what Career Tech expected of her as a student. "Well, I just come here every day and do what I'm supposed to do," she said. "I do my work and be here on time. I just try to, uh, be and do all that I can try to possibly do."

When I asked Susan how she felt about being successful, in her unassuming style she said, "It's OK. Yeah, I've completed it this far." However, as she began to recount her educational journey, she seemed to realize the significance of her accomplishment. She recalled:

It was a group of ladies when I first started. I guess it was about nine of us—'bout nine or ten—and as we moved up to different months and mods, it was a lot of people that dropped out and had problems and we stopped seeing 'em. You know, they stopped coming, always coming in late. So now with me being on my seventh mod...it's me and two more other ladies that, that have been hanging in and we've been knowing each other since the first month, so those, we are about the only three that's left out of the 10 people that we started with. So I'm glad that I was one of the ones that hung in there.

Susan said that her meanings of college success were framed by a strong desire to change a major part of her life—her profession—and that being successful in learning new skills would allow that change to happen.

...just um just got burned out on doing CNA. And plus, where I'm at now, I just made a decision that, OK, what if I leave here [her job], I can't do nothing but find another CNA job. And so, that's really all that I have and so I was looking to do something else.

The ultimate success for Susan will be to get certified, become a medical assistant, and find a job in a hospital or a specialty clinic. Certification, she said, will be her entree to "go out and achieve something." Susan's success in college has made her feel like she has the capacity to learn and do more. She is therefore considering going into nursing after gaining more experience in healthcare.

I'll be able to take everything that I learnt from the college and go out and apply it somewhere in a hospital or a nursing facility. It was real helpful. So, in the future, ain't no tellin' where I'll be working in it, so it was helpful.

At our second meeting, on a Sunday afternoon at a fast-food restaurant near her home, Susan arrived in casual attire of T shirt and jeans, but was once again immaculately groomed. She initially declined my offer to buy her a drink, but opted for a fruit drink upon second offer. Despite noisy kitchen sounds and a steady rush of patrons, Susan remained focused, sat up straight with little movement, and answered each question politely.

By this time, with her definition of success still intact, Susan had passed the milestone of completing all classroom modules and was preparing to enter her externship the following day. It was one of the rare occasions in which she described her feelings, albeit shrouded by her pragmatism.

[I'm] happy that I actually went and finished it, 'cause at first I thought that I wudn't going to be able to do it. Partly that I went and finished it and, you know, got it out of the way. So I'm ready to go and apply the skills that I learnt.

The following themes emerged to describe Susan's meanings of college success:

- Continual process of working toward her objectives
- Doing what she is supposed to do
- Discovering her capacity to learn
- Learning and applying skills
- Certification entrée to professional success
- Finishing it, getting it out of the way
- Pride in herself for not dropping out
- Creating new job opportunities
- Interested in becoming a nurse

Participant 2: Christmas

Christmas is an African American female who, during my interviews with her, was a 35 years of age and in the seventh module of the medical assisting program. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, (b) was a single mother, (c) was financially independent, (d) had delayed college at least one year after high school and (e) had earned a GED. Christmas attended daytime classes and began her one-month externship, the final phase of the medical assisting program, two days after our last meeting. Christmas was unemployed and had a 13-year-old daughter. Christmas was interviewed twice; the first occurred at the school and the second at her apartment complex. The interviews lasted a total of two hours and were held 10 days apart.

Background

For our first meeting, Christmas arrived straight from class, laden with backpack, lunch kit, purse, jacket, and a box of candy that she was selling on behalf of her daughter's school. She set her load down and was eager to begin our discussion. Dressed in blue scrubs, her hair was neatly combed back, and she wore no jewelry and little makeup. She firmly took my hand and formally introduced herself. She struck me as being both mature and professional. When I asked if she would like to create her own pseudonym, "Christmas" immediately spilled from her mouth. As I looked at Christmas, with her bright eyes and engaging laugh which literally shook her round form, I concurred that her jolly nature and her newly assumed name were a perfect match.

It became clear early on in our first conversation that Christmas was both a quick talker and a quick thinker, so much so that second and third thoughts often began spilling from her lips before she completed a sentence expressing the first. She had a tendency to confirm that she had heard the question correctly, or that she was answering it in the proper context. Her answers often led to her own questions, upon which she would ask if I wanted an answer. Christmas was at once articulate and illustrative in her speech, although my transcription revealed extreme disfluencies. In reviewing the summary that I had provided her of our conversations, she was taken aback and vowed to work on her verbal communications skills.

Christmas easily made eye contact and used her hands liberally to augment her speech. She seemed most comfortable leaning on the table with her forearms flat. For emphasis, she would straighten her posture and, with her right hand held vertically, drive the ends of her fingers forcefully to the table.

She spoke frequently of her family—her parents and her daughter—all of whom encouraged her to go to college. She often invoked the wisdom of her parents and bragged on her daughter as the conversation allowed. Her father was a major influence on her decision to go to college. "His feelings are if you don't get it [an education], you're not, you ain't got it," Christmas shared. She described her daughter as a well-rounded 13-year old, who as an A-B student set an example for her mother.

At our second interview, held in the community room of her apartment complex, Christmas donned a Philadelphia Eagles football jersey and cap, her "running gear," as

she liked to call it, as Saturdays were her errand days. On this particular day she was plagued by allergies, taking an occasional moment to blow her nose, but seldom failing to pick up mid-sentence where she left off.

Despite being a GED recipient, Christmas said that she had always considered herself an educated woman. Having felt that previous jobs had met her needs, she had no desire to further her education until her most recent job as a customer service representative at an international shipping company was lost during a restructuring of the company. She was left with the decision of getting another nine-to-five job or pursuing a career. A severance package allowed her to choose career training.

... but I firmly believe it's true that you know, when things, when the shift or move comes in your life, the Lord may just be kicking your butt, saying, "Guess what, it's time for you to do something different."

Her decision to study medical assisting was based on a personal desire to help people and on doing research which led her to believe that healthcare is a growing field with various opportunities. She explained:

... something like the medical field, you're there to take of people. You're there to make people feel better. You're there to be concerned. And sometimes I'm more concerned about some people than I am about me for my own self, so why not use and tap into some other resources and tools and talents that maybe I didn't even know I had?

I'm watching the news and I'm watching CNN, and every, more than anything, the medical field is booming. Literally, they even called it at one point, um, what is called 'recession-proof' because people will always be sick...

She added that because there is such a broad range of venues in which to practice medical assisting, it would be difficult to get bored with the profession. She also made a conscious decision to pursue fast-track training.

...it just depends on the individual, but for me, it's time is of the essence and I need to make the most of my time. And when you are a single parent, and you know your livelihood and trying to survive is on the line and you have no one else to be dependent or reliant on, you do what you feel is best. And coming here and going through this program is what I felt would be most successful and helpful to me.

As we discussed whether she considered herself to be a nontraditional college student, Christmas drew a heavy sigh, and in a confessional tone, stated, "Yeah. I guess,

I guess I would. Yeah, big time.” She surmised that her status as a delayed-entry student may have helped fuel the anxiety she felt upon entering college, recalling that she had said to herself, “After all these years [I hope] the worthy old brain cells, the old brain cells won’t let me down.” She also contrasted herself with younger students who are likely more accustomed to the structure and routine of school. Having been unemployed for several months prior to entering college, she recalled that “...it did take a lot of discipline for me to shut off the TV, quit sitting in front of the TV, uh you know, stop getting on the computer.” In a mocking tone she added, “Oh my God, I actually have to study again.” Yet, while having several years of work experience also made Christmas feel nontraditional, it gave her confidence because she was able to be a role model for the younger, less mature students.

Christmas started the program fearful of failure and with expectations of merely “seeing it through.” She kept her insecurities to herself and found that as she progressed in the program, her confidence grew.

I guess as you learn the work and you understand and depending on [whom] the teachers are you have, it doesn’t come as hard as, as first impressions. First impressions, like, ‘Oh my gosh! Can I do this? Am I going to be able to do this? Is this going to be too overwhelming, too much?’ And then once I got into it, [it] was like, OK, it’s not so bad.

Christmas’ nontraditional college student themes emerged as follows:

- Job loss brought her to college
- Needed to provide as single parent
- Received encouragement from parents, daughter
- Sought career in growing field
- Had desire to tap into her talents
- Livelihood depended on fast-track training
- Had low expectations of “seeing it through”
- Transition to student required discipline
- Delayed entry, age created anxiety
- Initial fear of failure dissipated with time

Meanings of Success

When I asked Christmas about her meaning of college success, her initial reply included the expected elements of gaining knowledge in school and applying it in the workplace. Yet, there were undertones related to personal development.

...college success to me would mean that I went to school to gain a career [and] to gain insight and knowledge I didn’t have before. And if I’m able to go out there and apply it and expand it and prove myself knowledgeable and capable of what I’ve learned, then that to me is success. I’ve

accomplished going to school and applying what I've learned to be beneficial to those out in the field.

Christmas believed that she had already experienced a level of college success through an acquisition of knowledge and skills that will benefit her personally and professionally.

Being able to know certain signs to look for when I'm at home now and my daughter's sick. I have high blood pressure [and] unfortunately, my father has high blood pressure, and so just being able to take care of us and being able to assist in your family's livelihood and wellbeing, to some extent...is an accomplishment. So, you know, many people measure success in so many different ways. I'm measuring it by what I've learned, what I've obtained, and that I've been able to gain skills and talents that I once didn't have. It just feels good to know more than I did before.

Christmas' meaning of college success was influenced in part by one of her Career Tech instructors, who emphasized to her students that success was less about good grades than it was about knowledge and skills. With Christmas' personal circumstances dictating that her life take a new direction, acquiring knowledge and skills was part of a more encompassing meaning of success, the ability to negotiate a positive change.

... so the definition of that is, you know, life happened and I was determined to say, 'I lost my job at the beginning of the year, but how do I turn a negative into a positive?' You have no idea how my insides are bursting at the seams to know that I took a negative and turned it into a positive...

In acknowledging that her idea of college success was affected by her nontraditional student status, Christmas contrasted it with that of a typical university student.

Someone that has been to school for four years would definitely say... their level of education would be greater than mine, um, but at the same time they went for four years to serve the purpose they felt needed to be served. I came here for a purpose I needed to be served.

Graduating college, she said, would give her a sense of pride from having accomplished a major goal in her life. "Before, I was a GED graduate and now I'll be a college graduate," she said, adding that her certificate will give her the status of being an educated person. Success also means setting an example for her daughter.

So, for her to finally see it, um, it definitely makes me feel proud and I'm grateful to say, in spite of trying to be just a good parent, being the example of being a good or responsible parent, now I can say I can be also the example of what higher education, sacrifice, you know, uh, can do for you.

Reflecting back to her initial answer regarding college success, Christmas talked about her goal to a good job in her career field. Laughing, she proclaimed, "I need a job," with the shrillness and dramatic motions of an opera singer.

I need to go out there and be beneficial to someone's organization, company, you know, and office, and so, that would be the most important thing for my life and that is to, you know, uh to be able to land, you know, be able to land a good job at a location in a specialty that I know would be to my liking, where I can finally put to use all that I've learned.

Yet Christmas said she does not plan on being a medical assistant long term. She has already begun research on other medical careers and has decided that she wants to work "in the trenches" as a surgical technician.

Themes relative to the meaning of college success for Christmas were:

- Having college graduate status
- Gaining, applying new skills and talents
- Gaining a career
- Turning a negative into a positive
- Proving herself in the field
- Completing a major goal in life
- Being an example for her daughter
- Preparing for further training to become a surgical technician

Participant 3: Juanita

Juanita, a Hispanic female, was 21 years of age when I interviewed her during her sixth and seventh modules of the medical assisting program. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, (b) was a single mother, and (c) had delayed college at least one year after high school. Juanita attended evening classes and was unemployed. Her three children were 4 years, 2 years, and 10 months of age when we first met. Juanita was interviewed twice at the school. The interviews were held seven days apart and totaled 1½ hours in length.

Background

My interviews with Juanita were scheduled 1½ hours before her classes were to begin, and with Juanita arriving some 15 minutes late to each interview, I was glad that I built in extra time for our meetings. The first time, she was caught in late afternoon traffic, which I agreed seemed worse that day. The second time, she had to drop her brother off at work on the way to school because they share a vehicle.

Juanita is diminutive in stature, measuring perhaps five feet tall and weighing maybe 100 pounds. Despite being casually dressed in jeans and T shirt for both interviews, Juanita's appearance was immaculate. Her hair was neatly combed back, her eyebrows perfectly shaped, and her makeup flawlessly applied. Her nails were short and well manicured. She wore no jewelry. Bright white tennis shoes punctuated her attire.

Juanita spoke with a heavy Spanish accent. Because English is not her native language, she occasionally misused words and struggled with verb tense. She smiled frequently and was very polite. She could be self-deprecating, stating more than once, "Sometimes I confuse myself." On occasion she would respond, "I'm not really sure," instead of asking for the question to be repeated or explained. During our first meeting, Juanita appeared nervous, shaking her foot throughout the conversation. Her body language became more relaxed in the second conversation, with less lower-body movement and greater use of her hands.

I got the sense from Juanita that she likes to do things right. When I phoned her to set up our first interview, she asked if she should dress a certain way. When I asked if she had any further comments at the end of our first interview, she responded, "I'm a little concerned about the way I answered the questions," as if perhaps she had given me the wrong answers or had not explained herself well.

Juanita enrolled in college because having a career would allow her to provide for her children as a single parent. It had been a goal of hers since high school because when she graduated she was married and pregnant with her second child. "I wasn't on top of my class, but at least I graduated and, um, I was thinking in my head I gotta go to college so I can provide for these kids of mine," she said.

Family problems, including the incarcerations of her father and her brothers, initially kept Juanita from attending college. "So everybody was going in and out of jail

and it was like a hard time for me to go through,” Juanita explained. During this time, Juanita had her third child and afterwards was discouraged by her husband at the time to go to college.

... it was hard because um, my, the father of my kids wanted me to be a stay-home mom so that way he can be the provider for us. And he thought that for me it wasn't a good idea for me to go to college right away, which was pretty upsetting for me.

When Juanita's husband walked out on her and her children in early 2009, she moved back in with her mother, a move that made college possible.

I had kind of made an agreement with her [her mother] that she would help me out with the kids if I went to college, so that was a good for me 'cause I wanted to go to college. I had been wanting to go and my dad's been pressuring me, “Go to college. Go to college.” I decided that I needed to go, for the sake of the kids. And just for me, I felt like it was a long time for me to be waiting to get started.

However, Juanita's foray into higher education was not as smooth as she would have liked. She initially chose a proprietary school closer to home, but her ex-husband was a student there at the time and did not want her attending the same school. In order to avoid conflict, Juanita acquiesced and ended up traveling twice the distance to Career Tech. Still, after researching Career Tech, she felt she had found a college that met her requirements as a “good college for me to go to that was quick and easy and it was going to be hands-on for me.” She enrolled as an evening student because her mother was free to watch her children during that time. When her mother's work schedule changed, Juanita's sister was able to keep her children until a babysitter could be found.

Juanita, who participated in a health sciences class in high school, said she had always been interested in the medical field. She wants to be in a helping profession and feels she is well-suited to medical assisting. “I want to help people out,” she said. “I wanna' be there and um, and I'm not afraid of anything that's going to go on in the medical field.”

Juanita said she considered herself to be a nontraditional college student based on the type of college she chose to attend and the fact that she delayed her entry after graduating high school.

... I know I am because I just skipped everything else and just came here for something quick. And then here, I just feel like I'm not the only one. All the other people took a long time from graduating to come straight here.

Implying that being a single parent also made her feel nontraditional, she noted that as one among many single parents at Career Tech, she felt accepted. She did not feel that being a nontraditional student made college any harder for her, noting that everyone faces obstacles in life.

Juanita said people often asked why she didn't attend a public college. She tells them she doesn't know why, but when I asked if she had regrets, she gave some reasons for her choice.

I don't have any second thoughts because I'm actually going for what I really want to go to, which is just to become a medical assistant. And I basically feel like I don't really need all my, the basic classes that you're required to take as a regular [student].

Juanita attended class from 5:00 to 10:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Her 30-mile drive from campus put her arrival at home after 11:00 p.m., at which time she would do her homework. She explained, "[It] is not a problem for me 'cause I take a nap with my kids during the daytime. It's OK for me. I don't see it really being hard for me doing my schoolwork or anything."

Despite being a straight-A student at Career Tech, Juanita said she had entered the program scared that she would not succeed because she felt weak and insecure. She recalled, "I had a little birdie telling me that I wasn't going to be anything, that like, 'Oh, you can't do it in college,'" she said. Listening to her Career Tech recruiter discuss the program added to her doubts as she wondered if she would be capable of performing the various procedures required such as venipunctures and taking vital signs. However, she soon found the program not to be as hard as she expected. "I was worried about nothing, basically," she said.

Yet, while the school work was doable, Juanita was still unsure whether she could manage going to school. The young mother considered dropping out of the program because she felt guilty leaving her children. "It was like one of hardest things for me was to see them crying when I left," she said. At the same time, it was her children who motivated her to stay in school.

I always went home and I saw my kids, and they're the reasons why I didn't drop out. Me thinking that I had, I actually had to go to school for them, and for myself, so that way I can better myself and become a better person. That's how I felt. That's why I didn't drop out.

With time, that conflict dissipated as well. Now, said Juanita, "They just tell me, 'bye mommy,' so I know they're good."

When I asked Juanita if she had any questions of me as we concluded our second conversation, I felt in her answer a longing to continue her education. "I don't really know like how is it to be in, uh, like in a university, and a bigger college than it is here," she said. "That's one thing that I really want to know, like how is the experience, what is the difference, to see if it's really going to be better for me or is it just the same or something." Given that she had previously expressed to me a desire to someday become a registered nurse, I hoped that she would find out on her own.

Juanita's nontraditional college student themes were:

- Needed to provide for her family
- Needed quick, easy hands-on training
- Saw no need for non-related, basic classes
- Family problems caused college delay
- Felt weak and insecure
- Interest in healthcare began in high school
- Conflicted as mother between school and children
- Living with mother made college possible

Meanings of Success

Juanita described success as a continual and reciprocal process of putting forth her best effort to enhance the learning process. She pointed to her 4.0 grade point average as one indicator of that process.

Success in college just means that you're doing what you're supposed to do. I'm learning, uh, learning a lot of things. I have a 4.0 average. Um, I'm putting the effort into it instead of just slacking off. I'm just basically, I just feel that um success in college means you're giving the effort all the way into the school to the program and everything.

Given her initial lack of self confidence, fear of what school would entail, and issues balancing school with motherhood, Juanita felt that the fact that she was still in college was the greatest marker of her success. "From going from just thinking about it to me actually doing it, that feels like a big success for me," she said.

Her success thus far has improved her outlook on life and has given her confidence. “Me giving it a chance has made me stronger in knowing that yes, I can do it.” She said her success will continue to impact her life because what she has learned will help her make a difference once she starts practicing her skills in the workplace.

And then now I know I’m going to be somebody. I’m going to be a medical assistant. I’m going to be helping people’s lives. I’m going to be helping families. I know I’m a better person, a better and greater person now than I was before.

Graduation will be the major mark of success for Juanita, and she wants to use that success to serve as a role model for others.

That’s my main goal for me to do, is graduate and getting a job afterward. After I graduate, being able to provide for my family. And show everybody, the people out there that are there struggling thinking that they can’t, that they can’t go to college because they have kids. I can just tell them, I have three kids, I’m a single parent and I made it.

The following themes emerged to describe Juanita’s meanings of college success:

- Giving the effort all the way
- From thinking about it to doing it
- Giving it a chance, not dropping out
- Learning
- Making good grades
- Graduating and getting a job
- Becoming a better person
- Being a role model for other parents
- Having the desire to train as RN

Participant 4: Violet

My interviews with Violet, a Caucasian female, spanned her sixth and seventh modules of the medical assisting program. She was 36 years of age at the time. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, (b) was a single mother, (c) had delayed college at least one year after high school, (d) had earned a GED and (e) was financially independent. Violet attended daytime classes and was employed 30 hours per week as a waitress. Her daughter was going on 9 years of age when we spoke. Violet was interviewed twice. The interviews occurred at the school immediately after class, were held seven days apart, and lasted a total of 1½ hours.

Background

When I first met Violet, I immediately noticed her vivid, violet blue eyes, which I soon discovered were very communicative as well. Violet provided almost constant eye contact, even as her eyes would tear up, which they had a tendency to do when she discussed emotional issues. When she did not suggest a pseudonym for herself, I decided to call her Violet. The second feature of Violet's that I noticed was her deeply furrowed brow, which made her appear older than her 36 years. Of average build, Violet wore glasses and had brown, medium-length hair, which she wore pulled back only in class, as pony tails give her a headache.

Violet arrived on time for both interviews, despite having an apparently bad cold during the second. She said she would have felt bad about canceling and I appreciated her resolve. In our first interview, Violet came across as being no nonsense, confident, and strong-willed. She would sometimes laugh at the simplicity of the questions. When asked why she went to college, she answered, "Obviously, better employment. I don't want to work at the [restaurant name] forever." Describing Career Tech as a "means to an end," she stated that "there's not a doubt in my mind that I can do this. I'm very independent. I'm going to do what I need to do to get things done, and I'm not going to ask for help unless I need it."

During both interviews, Violet's body language was relaxed. Rather than lean forward, she would often rest back in her chair with her feet crossed comfortably at the ankles. Occasionally, when sharing personal information, she would straighten her posture and sit on both hands, as if she did not want to say too much. She later told me in our follow-up conversation that "I feel like I got too personal."

During the second interview, despite her frequent nose blowing and shortness of breath, Violet seemed to be much more opinionated. This could have been due to the fact that the questions in the previous interview were more about her as a nontraditional student and that the second set dealt with the practices at Career Tech. As I noticed contradictions from our previous conversation, it occurred to me that perhaps she was becoming more open with me. In our first conversation, Violet said of starting Career Tech, "With my background, I thought I'd do fine. I wasn't intimidated or anything." In our second conversation, she revealed that "before I started college, I didn't know... I

had no confidence. I get teary-eyed (fighting back tears). I had no confidence I could do anything. And now that I've proven myself, that's the greatest thing."

Violet, who earned her GED at the age of 28, explained that she did not go to college sooner because "I was working and getting married and getting divorced and having a baby, in that order (laughs)." During this period she was also abusing alcohol and drugs. Had her daughter not been born, said Violet, "I think I probably would have been dead by the time I was 30." Tilting her head upward, as if toward heaven, she added, "And it's only by the grace of God, 'thank you,' that I have a normal daughter."

Having a child motivated Violet to not only change her lifestyle, but to pursue a college education.

I was 28 years old and living for me and then all of a sudden, here's this little baby that is solely my responsibility. So everything had to change. And I'm not, I can't, I can't raise her the way I want to on the salary at [restaurant]. So, I had no option. I had to finish college. No matter how long it's taken, I've had to.

Violet first began college about five years ago, taking the prerequisites for a nursing program at a local community college. However, she struggled with the coursework, particularly math, so she dropped out. Since then, she had been waitressing to support herself and her daughter. Last year, Violet turned to medical assisting as a "baby step" toward eventually gaining acceptance into a nursing school and ultimately pursuing her long-term goal of being a mid-wife. Her attendance at Career Tech was made possible in part because she and her daughter live with her mother. "I couldn't do it without my mom," Violet said, fighting back tears. "I couldn't do it without my mother," she repeated in a near whisper.

Violet had long desired to work in the medical field and grew tired of putting off her dream. She came to Career Tech seeking training that would allow her to realize her goal quickly.

It's eight months. It's quick, it's easy. It's going to get me out of the restaurant. It's going to [mean] regular paychecks. ... I'm getting too old to be carrying 50-pound trays around, you know? I don't want to do it anymore. And I want to be able to, I want to have a normal life with my kid.

Violet's interest in healthcare began as a child. She was first inspired by a cousin who was an RN assigned to medical choppers. She also fondly remembered going to

work with her mother, who has worked in an insurance department of a hospital for 30 years. As an adult, Violet worked at a psychiatric hospital for four years as a receptionist and in admissions and medical records. She realized that she did not like sitting behind a desk each day. “I want to be up and moving and interacting and taking care of people,” she said. “Not necessarily in a psych hospital, although I would do it if it was offered,” she added with a laugh.

Although she had never thought about her status as a nontraditional student prior to our conversations, Violet allowed that she was nontraditional by virtue of being a single mother. However, she did not feel impeded by that status.

It is what it is. I have a calendar. I schedule compulsively and I go to school, I do my homework, I go to work. And like I said, I couldn’t do it without my mom. She takes, she watches my daughter when I work at night. So if I wanted it to be difficult, I would have made it difficult on myself, but only I can do that, so I choose not to.

The following themes emerged to describe Violet as a nontraditional college student:

- Wanted to be better provider for child
- Had hectic school/work schedule
- Wanted job suitable to being a mother
- Lifestyle caused college delay
- Sought fast-track out of waitressing
- Was a previous college dropout
- Was tired of putting off career
- Had a longtime interest in healthcare
- Living with mother made college possible

Meanings of Success

When I asked Violet about her meaning of college success, her answer was the most succinct, yet most encompassing one that I had heard from any of the participants. In eight short words, she said, “A better future for my daughter and myself.” Because graduating from Career Tech and getting certified as a medical assistant represented the first phase toward that end for Violet, she described her college success thus far as “something that’s going to be built upon.” Still, she did not downplay her accomplishments to date, believing that should she not realize her ultimate dream of becoming a mid-wife, she is still moving in the right direction. “Whatever that, whatever the outcome is going to be, I know it’s going to be better than what we have right now,” she said.

At the least, Violet viewed her success at Career Tech as her ticket out of the hospitality industry, a precarious environment for someone with an addictive personality such as hers.

Things get thrown in your face all the time. “Let’s go have a drink.” “Let’s go out and do this.” You know, that kind of thing. I’m not there. I don’t want to do that anymore. I just need to get out of the hospitality industry and this was the easiest way, so eight months, get your education, and go to work. And then I can continue on.

She said that being a single mother had strongly influenced her meaning of college success and inspired her to work hard in college.

I would never have started college if I, well I can’t never say never, but my life was in a completely different place before I had my daughter, so, and like I said, everything changed, and you have to focus.

She said that she had studied more in this program than she did in her entire high school career and was proud of her strong grade point average. Her success in college has made her feel more confident. She said, “I’ve always known that I could do things if I just put my mind to it. I just never put my mind to it 100 percent.”

When we last spoke, Violet was a week away from starting her externship. She used the analogy of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel to describe her near completion of the classroom phase of her education at Career Tech. When asked how her success would impact her future, her answer paralleled her meaning of college success when she declared, “Better life.” She restated her commitment to continue her education.

... I see where I want to be at the end and I know that I can do it. Baby steps. Um, I won’t struggle. I’ve, I’ve been at the bottom and scraped my way by. And, once I finish my education, I’m not going to have to struggle any more. It’s always a battle; it’s just how hard the battle’s going to be.

The following themes emerged to describe how Violet gave meaning to college success:

- Better future
- Baby steps
- Getting degreed and certified
- Escape from current job situation
- Making good grades
- New-found confidence
- Required putting her mind to it
- Not having to struggle any more
- Desire to become a mid-wife

Participant 5: Julie

Julie, a Caucasian female, was 38 years old and in the seventh module of the medical assisting program when I interviewed her. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, (b) had delayed college at least one year after high school, and (c) was financially independent. Julie attended daytime classes and was not employed. Julie was the oldest participant and had delayed college entrance the longest of the six participants.

Julie was interviewed twice in person. The interviews occurred at the school immediately after her class, were held seven days apart and lasted a total of 1 1/3 hours. Because the second interview was rushed, a 30-minute phone interview was conducted later the same week.

Background

Julie arrived for our first interview on time as I was finishing up a follow-up visit with another participant in the next room. Her punctuality surprised me, given that she had forgotten that we were to meet the day before and had scheduled a teacher conference for the same time. Julie had two teen-age daughters and was the stepmother to three children, the youngest of whom was a 6-year-old son who lived with her, her husband and her daughters. Given her familial obligations, I understood the scheduling slip-up and was grateful that she was making time to speak to me. When I returned to our assigned room to begin my session with Julie, she was talking on her cell phone. I knew that she had not initiated the call. She told me when we first spoke that her phone could only receive calls because her husband had not paid the phone bill.

Thus, before our first interview had even begun, I had gained insight into some of the various concerns, including family and finance, which competed for Julie's attention. Shortly into that first conversation, it became evident to me that Julie was willing to discuss her issues in great detail, so much so that I often felt she was using the interview as a conduit for venting her frustrations. She was a self-described pessimist who expressed resentment about going to college late in life and anger at her husband, whom she described as unsupportive. By the time our second in-person interview concluded

with Julie rushing out to make her mortgage payment on time, I could understand why Julie would have a need to simply talk.

Julie came to the first meeting dressed in blue scrubs and a salmon-colored sweater. She had in tow a wheeled pink and black back pack and was sporting a multi-colored purse. After taking a moment to reconcile the feminine accessories with Julie's stocky physique and brassy voice, I noted that her long, strawberry blond hair was pulled back and fashionable glasses adored her face, which was devoid of makeup.

Julie spoke directly with little or any deliberation and punctuated her speech with various hand movements. As she considered the questions, she would raise her hand to her cheek and make a flicking motion with her fingers. When she spoke with conviction, her right hand would cut through the air in a repetitive karate-chopping motion as though she was separating and punctuating her words. At one point during the second interview, she picked up a pen off the table and with it began making swirling gestures as she spoke. Julie often did not exercise proper grammar and was prone to stop talking mid-sentence.

Being fired from her last three jobs, all part of a string of dead-end jobs, was the catalyst that brought Julie to college.

I had lost my job, uh, last November and, uh, just basically tired of dead-end jobs, not, you know, not having a career option to go back on. You know, just finding whatever's out there, so. And I've been out of school for 20 years so I just decided to go ahead and do it.

Every time that I got a job that I liked it was like a slap in the face. I got fired. And another time. And so, it just, I guess all that just really led up to what I really needed to be doing, and that was going to school.

The prospect of attending college made Julie feel nervous and scared. Yet, the decision to do so represented a turning point in her life and raised her confidence. No longer would she let not having a job consume her; rather, she would work to improve her circumstances.

The motivation to succeed in college came largely from a desire to do more for her two daughters; one had just started college and the other was a high school senior. Teary-eyed, Julie explained that she couldn't give her youngest daughter the things that most seniors take for granted, such as a car or a senior ring. Yet, she had been able to set an example for her children. "They see that I'm not sitting around taking it as it comes, being a bum, a housewife, or what have you," she said.

Medical assisting was not Julie's first choice of study. She came to Career Tech seeking information about its criminal justice program but the two-year length of the program and the accompanying cost put the program out of Julie's reach. "I really, you know, didn't have that much time, with not working," Julie said. "I was like I can't wait two years to go to work." Because she had always had an interest in the medical field, she chose medical assisting. And while medical assisting was her second choice, she insisted that Career Tech did not try to push her in that direction. "It's just like, it was the other, my other decision that I chose," she said.

Julie had considered enrolling at a community college but said that she did not receive the help she needed in filling out the application for federal aid. She recalled that she had visited a crowded financial aid office where she was given the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and told to take it home and fill it out. Julie recalled, "I had no idea what I was doing. From there, I didn't go back." She also explored online learning but knew that her need for hands-on training would not be fulfilled.

Julie regarded herself as a nontraditional student by virtue of delaying her education 20 years and being an older student. Comparing herself to her high school classmates, she said she felt like she was starting from "ground zero."

... my generation, say the people I graduated with, um, who 90 percent went to college straight out of high school, have got master's, bachelor's, you know all these degrees and, and are way up in education and half retired. ... and there are some, you know, some of us, some of my friends that are my age and whatever, are going back and doing a second round in college. You know, so they're on round two at my age.

For Julie, graduating from high school itself was a major accomplishment. She married her first husband at the age of 16 and she, along with her twin sister both graduated high school seven months pregnant. The 18-year-olds were the only two among the six children in her family to graduate. Said Julie, "There was nobody going to make me quit, nothing. School was something I was going to finish."

Having had her second daughter at the age of 21, Julie had to work to support her family, delaying her desire to go to college. With her daughters now raised, it's "my turn to go back," Julie said. She expressed that entering college as a delayed-entry student took a lot of courage. She recalled:

With me not, like I said, being out of school 20 years and not going, doing any schooling at all, from the time I graduated high school in '89 to when I decided, you know, this is it, I'm doing it now, you know, I was very scared."

It also made her studies more challenging, with Julie often having difficulties grasping concepts that seemed to come easier to the younger students. "I've been out so long that I've forgotten the learning concept or gotten out of that study mode," she said.

Other challenges, such as running a household while going to school and not having a second income, made her it difficult to attend college.

A lot of my stress factor, stress for me is not having a job, not having an income, and having to rely on my daughter for gas money, my mom to help pay my truck note. Hoping and praying my husband will pay the house note so we don't get the house taken away. And then all the other bills that are just piling up. I have that on my brain all the time. This has got to get done. This has got to get paid.

While her daughters and mother were supportive, Julie's husband was less supportive than he promised when she made the decision to go to college. "...there ain't no, been no support whatsoever," she said. "Just more of, 'Hurry up and get a job.'"

Even with conflicting circumstances, Julie said that she never considered dropping out of college. Once she became accustomed to the fast-paced program, she wanted to learn as much as possible. "I felt like I was starving for this knowledge so much that I'm going to be here," she said. "I'm not missing one minute." She added that she did not miss a day of class in seven months, an accomplishment she considered "a shocker for me."

The last time I saw Julie, we had met at a local Walmart McDonalds so I could present her with her gift card following her review of my interview summary. There to do her food shopping for the week, she carried a rather large coupon case. It was one of two, she explained, and was just for food purchases. Once again, I was reminded of her financial struggles and I hoped the \$50 gift card she had earned by participating in my study was helpful during the holiday season.

The following themes emerged to describe Julie's status as a nontraditional college student:

- Was tired of dead-end jobs
- Job loss was catalyst for college entry
- Need for job dictated short-term training
- Wanted hands-on training
- Entered college nervous and scared
- Delayed entry affected learning abilities
- Regretted not starting college sooner
- Received mixed family support
- Finances and family responsibilities made going to college difficult

Meanings of Success

Given Julie's direct approach to answering my questions, I was not surprised at how she defined college success. Despite a brief chuckle when she said "better pay," her answer was indicative of the straightforwardness I had come to expect and was logical coming from someone in her financial situation. "It's a job versus a career," she said, going on to explain that the major distinction between the two is that a career requires training and hence pays more. Julie had spent her adulthood working dead-end, low-paying jobs, ranging from retail to manufacturing to the Texas prison system. Wondering what could have been has made a major impact on how she views college success.

I guess, being out there working for the last 20 years, making minimum wage, never getting by, and then seeing others who just did this and you know... I mean, that's not, I know that's not the whole idea, but just being, from me being on the outside looking in at people who did college straight out of school, straight into careers, straight into jobs. Started the family *after* the career, and have done way better than [I have].

As our conversation turned its focus to being a currently successful college student as opposed to not pursuing college earlier, it also became more personal. Given her age and the challenges that delaying college presented, Julie felt that she was a successful college student by virtue of being able to complete the medical assisting program. She said, "I'm almost 40, so waiting this long and then deciding to this and finishing it, for me, is where I see I've succeeded in my college now." She saw her accompanying transformation as being part of her success. When she started college, she was depressed over not being able to hold a job. Now, she said she was highly motivated. "It gave me some of my confidence back [knowing] that I could come here and learn, pass and learn," she said.

Yet, even as she envisioned that her next success would be to transfer the skills she had learned in college to the workplace, a bit of uncertainty about her ability to learn was apparent:

To be able to take what I've learned here, go out to a field I've never been in and do the things that I've hopefully learned here, the things that I was taught. That's where my success for me is going to be.

She expressed hopes that her training had prepared her for a career in a field that she could stay with and even retire from, unlike her many jobs of the past. She said her ultimate success would be to become a nurse but should she not fulfill that goal, she would not consider herself a failure "because I *did* do this and I completed it."

Julie said that her college success had impacted her as a mother, and hence will impact the future of her daughters. As a mother, Julie felt successful because both of her daughters followed in her footsteps by finishing high school. Her college success now sets an example for them regarding higher education. "I have set the standard for my kids that 'if my mom's doing it, I can do it. My mom's way older than I am and if she's going to do this, I'm going to do this.'"

Julie's meanings of college success can be expressed through the following themes:

- Better pay
- A career to stay with and retire from
- "Deciding to this and finishing it" at her age
- Being able to apply what she has learned
- Confidence that she could pass and learn
- Improvement over years of "never getting by"
- Setting standard for her children
- Desire to eventually become a nurse

Participant 6: Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn, a Caucasian female, was in the seventh module of the medical assisting program when I first interviewed her. By the time of our second conversation, the 28-year-old had entered her externship. Information taken from her Applicant Information Form revealed that she held the following nontraditional characteristics, as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics: (a) had dependents, and (b) was financially independent. Kaitlyn attended daytime classes and was unemployed during our interviews, although she had previously worked part-time during her enrollment at Career Tech. She had an 8-year-old son.

Kaitlyn was interviewed twice. Our first interview was conducted at the school, and the second at a local Denny's restaurant. She came to the first interview immediately from class and to the second straight from her externship site. She arrived early for both

interviews, which lasted a total of two hours. The interviews were held 25 days apart due in part to an illness that I had and the onset of the Christmas holidays.

Background

Kaitlyn first presented herself to me clad in maroon scrubs covered by a large gray sweater. (She would later reveal that the labs are kept uncomfortably cold for her.) She was of a demure stature, donned glasses, and wore little, if any, makeup. Her shoulder-length, dark brown hair, garnished with tinges of gray, was pulled back neatly.

Kaitlyn was the final participant to be interviewed and represented the most unique in terms of her college experiences. Although she was 28 years of age, unlike the other participants, she did not delay attending college after high school. She attempted college twice prior to enrolling at Career Tech. Her first experience was in 1999, straight out of high school, when she chose to attend a community college away from home to study nursing. She often found herself sleeping in class or sleeping in at home instead of going to class. “I wasn’t ready yet,” she said. “Had I stayed home, I don’t think I would have messed around with school.” Her second attempt was five years later while stationed in Okinawa as a military wife. A business major, she dropped out because she was majoring in a field that really did not appeal to her. It was upon her family’s return to the United States in 2007 that she decided to go back to school and resume pursuing her dream to study nursing.

Also unique about Kaitlyn was the fact that during my research she was attending two colleges simultaneously—Career Tech and a local community college. In December 2007, she began taking prerequisites at the community college in hopes of being accepted into a bachelor’s degree nursing program. Kaitlyn described the medical assisting program at Career Tech, which she began in May 2009, as a backup plan, “just to have it.” She said, “I can work while I’m still in school, although I know once I’m in nursing school it’s going to be hard to work and go to school and take care of my son.” She expressed hope that her success at both institutions would enhance her chances of being accepted into a nursing program.

Although her community college offered medical assisting training, Kaitlyn felt that information about it was not readily available and that the program was too long. “...when I looked at the course catalog, at the book, and saw how long it was I was like,

nah, that wouldn't, I want to get done...," she said. She also considered online programs, which were less expensive, but felt that as a visual learner, hands-on experience would serve her better.

Kaitlyn was motivated to return to college in part by family and friends who had succeeded in college. She referred wistfully to two cousins, with whom she was very close, and her former roommate, all of whom have their bachelor's or master's degree. "... I look back and think that could be me if didn't play around and I didn't stop..." she said. As time progressed, not having a degree became less acceptable to her. "I didn't like just working and not having my degree," she said, "and I just finally buckled down and said 'I'm going to do this, and get it done.'" Having a son added another dimension to her decision. "I want to be able to provide for him," she said. "I don't want to be like, 'No, we don't have money.'"

Kaitlyn's decision to enter the medical field was also influenced by family members, including an aunt who was a doctor and another aunt and cousin who were registered nurses. "I want to be helping someone," said Kaitlyn. "Medical to me is fascinating." Having worked as a receptionist in her aunt's office, she started Career Tech's program with some knowledge of triage, medical terminology, and human systems.

Kaitlyn's recent educational pursuits lead to a discovery that she has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which manifested itself in part through test anxiety. After being diagnosed, she began taking medication and her grades improved. Her community college work included retaking classes to bring her grade point average up. When I met Kaitlyn, she was experiencing other challenges as well. She and her husband had just initiated a divorce and her uncle had passed away the previous week. It was also finals week at the community college where she was enrolled. She was dreading the upcoming relocation of herself and son as a result of her impending divorce and expressed concern about the immediate future. "It's hard, 'cause I want to go back to school," she said. "It's like how am I going to do this and where will I get the money? I'll figure it out. My family will help. I already know they will, so..."

Kaitlyn seemed to have strong family bonds. She spoke fondly of her parents and her aunts and uncles, one pair of whom she considers to be a second set of parents and

with whom she and her son will be living until she can reestablish herself after the divorce. Faith also appeared to play a role in her life. During our period of communication, her cell phone ringtone was religious music and her voicemail greeting ended with “God bless.” At our second meeting, she prayed over the meal prior to eating.

During our conversations, Kaitlyn was generally undemonstrative and very soft-spoken. Yet she was both straightforward and fluent, bringing up without query such topics as her divorce and her ADD. Kaitlyn would often pull her arms close to her body as if she was attempting to become even smaller than her already slight build. She sometimes hunched over as though she were under a tremendous weight. While her voice was not monotone, it was also devoid of inflection. As Kaitlyn became excited or expressed conviction about what she was saying, she would clasp her hands together—usually making a steeple with her forefingers—and bring them to her chin. Her smiles seemed passive and she rarely let out a chuckle.

Kaitlyn did not make small talk or any attempt at pleasantries. When asked how she was doing, she would say “OK,” accompanied by a heavy, forlorn sigh. I noted that she never inquired of my status, even after our second meeting was postponed due to severe case of laryngitis. I did not get the feeling that she was uncaring; rather that she was emotionally overloaded with all that was going on in her life. Perhaps for this reason, she seemed to approach tasks at hand in a matter-of-fact manner. At our second meeting, when our waitress interrupted our meal to tell us she had to take her son on an emergency trip to Children’s Hospital, Kaitlyn calmly told the waitress that she had just driven from the Medical Center and that the traffic was light.

Kaitlyn considered herself to be a nontraditional college student based on her attendance status. She was a full-time student at Career Tech and was one hour short of being full time at the community college during my research. She had actually started the semester full time at both institutions, but dropped a class due to conflicts with the part-time job she held at the time. She explained:

It’s not like everybody goes to two different schools to work on a degree. People at a university may have a minor or something, but it’s usually something that relates to a major. But you don’t see people going to two

different schools and trying to do that. Everyone that I've talked to are [is] just amazed at what I'm doing.

The nontraditional college student themes reflected in my conversation with Kaitlyn were as follows:

- Wanted to provide for son
- Needed fast-track training so she can work while continuing college
- Needed hands-on training
- Family influenced her to go to college
- Resented not finishing college earlier
- Was dealing with ADD
- Was attending two colleges simultaneously
- Sought certificate a back-up to nursing degree
- Did not like working without a degree

Meanings of Success

Kaitlyn described college success as a personal, continuous process that is best facilitated by passionate instructors. “[Success is] learning, having someone that teaches you and gives you the knowledge,” she said. “They have the passion to do it and to encourage you to do well and not give up...” She also offered insights on what college success is not, stating:

... success is not what everyone else thinks it is. It’s that you accomplish your goals. That you are satisfied with what you’ve learned. Not what mom wants you to do, what grandma wants you to do, or anybody like that. It’s what *you’ve* learned.

This meaning differed sharply from the one she held 10 years ago as a traditional student. At that time, college success for Kaitlyn meant going through the motions based on conventional expectations such as degree attainment. While she was pursuing multiple degrees when we spoke, this time she was in search of the knowledge that having a degree represents, rather than getting one because it was what she was supposed to do. She said her current meaning of college success was formed through a cumulative, intersubjective process.

Just by talking to different people, I remember, uh, talking to friends at church and what, uh, how people put things into perspective. How people look at things. And I’ve talked to some of my teachers as well. Just different ways. I’ve gotten different things from different people.

Being a young, soon-to-be single mother has also influenced what college success meant to her.

... I know when I walk across the stage, it’s going to be I’ll know I did it. I didn’t give up. It’s important that he [her son] sees that I’m not giving up, I’m trying and I’m not stopping. That way he sees that school is important, and it’s “I can go to college when I’m older or not go.”

Kaitlyn felt that during her simultaneous attendance at a community college and Career Tech, she experienced college success at both institutions. She explained, “I’m learning what I set out to learn, and I’m doing better with my grades and studying and taking the time and disciplining myself with it, ‘cause I know I can procrastinate.” Making good grades was particularly important to Kaitlyn as her next immediate goal was to be accepted into a bachelor’s degree nursing program. She was hopeful that maintaining a high grade point average from two institutions will increase her chances.

Her alternative plan is to be accepted into an associate's degree program and complete a bridge program to a bachelor's program. Her ultimate desire was she to get her master's degree in nursing.

Kaitlyn said that college has not been more difficult for her as a nontraditional student, but that success does require tenacity, such as that she displayed in taking Anatomy and Physiology I three times before passing the course.

It would be just as hard being a traditional student going to a university, a four-year university, but, it's not hard. You just have to stick to it and not give up. That's the biggest thing is people give up. I see people give up on school and you just can't give up. You've got to keep going and strive for it.

Kaitlyn's meanings of college success are reflected in the following themes:

- Passionate instructors imparting knowledge
- Accomplishing your goals
- Being satisfied with what you have learned
- Not giving up
- Being able to work as MA while attending nursing school
- Making better grades
- Earning a degree with the knowledge it represents
- Finishing what she began years ago
- Acceptance into nursing school
- Showing son that school is important

Profile Summary

The reader has now been introduced individually to each of the six participants in my study. This was done by: (a) establishing each participant as a nontraditional college student based both on NCES criteria; (b) relating their lived meanings as nontraditional college students; and (c) describing their meanings of college success. This introduction will allow the nontraditional student status of the participants to permeate the ensuing discussion on the meanings of nontraditional student success and how proprietary school practices may impact that success.

Research Question 1: The Meaning of College Success

Using the preceding profiles of the six participants as a foundation, following is data analysis in response to Research Question 1: What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term "college success?" The rationale for this question was twofold: (a) to identify goals that nontraditional students bring with them to college, including the expectations they have of the college experience

and of themselves; and (b) to bring clarity to how students' nontraditional traits and life experiences have influenced these goals and expectations. The steps for this process, as outlined in Figure 2, are to develop a composite set of nontraditional characteristics and a composite set of college success meanings and then to establish a relationship between the two.

Nontraditional Student Characteristics

The commonalities that participants shared as nontraditional college students are described in this section. A composite of themes describing these commonalities is drawn from the participant background section of the profiles previously presented. Becoming acquainted with these commonalities will provide the basis for understanding participants' meanings of college success, which as will be subsequently revealed, they inform. This process consequently represents the first step toward establishing connectivity between participants as nontraditional students and their meanings of college success.

Emergence of Nontraditional Student Themes

Six broad themes, reflective of the complex and interdependent lifeworlds of the participants, emerged from the individual nontraditional student characteristics and are presented in Table 10, along with the individual themes that make up the common themes. The notation next to each theme is the initial of the pseudonym for the participant who expressed that particular sentiment (Ju is used for Juanita). Not every participant had an individual theme fall into each category, but if a category had four or more participants contributing to it, it became one of the six commonalities. Key questions which led to an understanding of participants' lifeworlds as nontraditional college students were: (a) What made you decide to go to college?, (b) What was it about the program that made you select it?, and (c) Do you consider yourself to be a nontraditional student, and if so, in what ways?

Table 10

Composite Nontraditional Student Themes and Their Corresponding Individual Themes

Need to support family	Need for practical training	Desire for personal growth	Self doubt	Multiple responsibilities	Family support
As single parent, needed to provide for family (S, C, Ju, V, K)	Need to get job required fast-track training (C, Ju, J, K)	Tired of current job, wanted different career (S)	Delayed entry created anxiety or affected learning process (C, S, J)	Physically, mentally fatigued by job and school (S, V)	Encouragement from adult relatives (C, Ju, J, K)
Job loss(es) brought her to college (C, J)	Need for hands-on training (S, Ju, J, K)	Bettering herself (S)	Previous college failure fueled doubts (V, K)	Conflicted as a mother between school and children (Ju)	Encouragement from children (C, J, K)
Need for better job brought her to college (S, V)	Long-time interest in medical (V, Ju, K)	Desire to tap into her talents (C)	Grueling schedule made her doubt her ability to go on (S)	Family responsibilities overwhelming (J)	Living with relative made college possible (Ju, V, K)
Needed to contribute to family income (J)	MA a logical step up from CNA (S)	Wanted job suitable to family life (V)	Initial fear of failure (C)	Financial stressors (J)	Looked to relatives to help with expenses (J, K)
Desire to do more for her daughters (J)	Sought out career in growing field (C)	Tired of waiting to start career (V)	Began with low expectations of seeing it through (C)	Attending two colleges (K)	
Need for job while attending college brought her to college (K)	Tired of waiting to start career (V)	Tired of dead-end jobs (J)	Felt weak and insecure at first (Ju)		
	MA a back-up to nursing degree (K)	Regretted not starting college earlier (J)	Entered college nervous, scared (J)		
		Regretted not earning degree in first college attempt (K)			

Categorization of Nontraditional Characteristics

After synthesizing the individual themes into a set of common themes or characteristics, I considered them in relation to participant experiences. This is important because experiences, which inform meanings, can be interpreted (van Manen, 1990). This additional step led to the categorization of characteristics as follows:

- Needs
 - need to support family
 - need for practical training
- Internal influences
 - desire for personal growth
 - self doubt
- External influences
 - multiple responsibilities
 - family support

Needs. All of the participants came to Career Tech with two tangible needs. The need to support family was the primary reason that they gave for going to college. This need reflected the marital status of the participants. Four were single mothers and Kaitlyn, although not yet physically separated from her husband, was preparing for an impending divorce. Each of them had one child to support. The remaining participant, Julie, had two children and three stepchildren and it was necessary for her to contribute to the household income. In every case, participants wanted to do more than provide basic support for their children, as in the case of Julie, who was unable to buy her youngest daughter a senior class ring and Violet, who knew that as a waitress she could not give her daughter the life she wanted her to have.

The second need, practical training, was multidimensional. First, the training had to provide a fast-track to the workforce, tying back to the participants' need to support their families. As Julie noted about herself, the participants all had children before pursuing higher education, unlike traditional students who, by definition, begin college before having children. They needed quick training not only to create a livelihood, but because their complex lifestyles could not sustain long-term training.

Second, the training had to prepare participants for a career with good job prospects. As a recent victim of company downsizing, Christmas was attracted to medical assisting because it was “recession-proof.” Julie, who had been repeatedly fired from jobs, hoped it would mean the end of the line for dead-end jobs. Third, the training needed to use a hands-on approach. Most said they were visual learners, and as Susan explained, “I need more hands-on in order for it to stick in my head.” Lastly, it was important for participants to train in a field in which they had a personal interest. For five of them, medical assisting was to be the first step toward new and higher aspirations, while for Susan it was the continuation of a career begun seven years ago.

Internal influences. Two of the nontraditional characteristics were impacted by internal influences. While the desire for personal growth could be considered a need, I regarded it an internal influence because it reflected the individualism of the participants. Each sought something different from their college experience that would help them grow not only professionally, but as a person. While Christmas wanted a career that would tap into her people skills and need to help others, Violet wanted a job that would make her a more present and consequently better mother. For Susan, the training represented a means of taking on greater responsibilities in the workplace. Juanita needed the satisfaction of knowing that she could make something of herself.

The most prominent internal influence dictating who participants were as nontraditional students was self doubt. Most experienced it going into the program, and they described themselves as being weak, insecure, nervous, scared, and fearful at that time. Susan, Christmas, and Julie all said that their delayed entry had made them feel doubtful about their abilities to adjust to a new routine and keep up with younger students. Kaitlyn and Violet had been unsuccessful in previous college attempts. Juanita, as a young single mother of three, doubted that she could do anything beyond being a mother. For some, such as Juanita and Christmas, those feelings dissipated quickly; for others, they would come and go. As Kaitlyn explained, “Some days it feels like, it felt like I couldn’t do it...”

External influences. Two primary external influences on participants' status as nontraditional students were multiple responsibilities and family support. The responsibilities mentioned by the participants were work, family, and finances. Violet, who combined schooling with long and inconsistent waitressing hours, described her life as exhausting. Susan experienced 16-hour school/work days four days a week, using lunch time at work to study. Kaitlyn worked part-time while going to two schools until her employer was no longer willing to work with her school schedule. She described her schedule as being "very tiring and exhausting." Juanita adapted her daily routine to take naps during the day with her children because she started her homework near midnight upon returning home from school. In addition to the responsibilities of raising a family, Julie was burdened with a lack of finances.

The influence of family support on the participants was multigenerational and in most cases positive. Regardless of the age of the participants, all but one pointed to parental encouragement, support, or influence as a motivation for going to and remaining in college. In fact, half of the participants and their children lived with a parent or older relative. Participants also shared a reciprocally supportive relationship with their children. Those with older children talked with pride about how their children encouraged them. Christmas said that she even follows the example of her 13-year-old who makes good grades in school.

Summary

The nontraditional characteristics of each participant were synthesized into a composite of six nontraditional college student characteristics which are: (a) need to support family, (b) need for fast-track, practical training, (c) desire for personal growth, (d) self doubt, and (e) family support. An analysis of these characteristics revealed that they stemmed from participants' needs, internal influences, or external influences, all of which are a product of participants' experiences.

Meanings of College Success

In this section, the individual meanings of college success as described by participants are grouped into common themes. Each of the themes is then described as reflecting either personal or practical meanings. This process represents the

second step toward establishing a relationship between participants as nontraditional students and their meanings of college success.

Development of Themes

Participants were asked a set of questions regarding what college success meant to them (see Appendix B). The questioning began broadly and directly with, “What does college success mean to you?” Because this study was about how current students understood the meanings of college success, additional questions related to whether and how participants had experienced college success. An analysis of the data collected during the interviews resulted in the development of six common themes: (a) getting a better job, (b) graduation/certification, (c) gaining/using knowledge and skills, (d) not giving up, (e) being able to do what is expected by the college, and (f) transforming their lives.

The themes are presented in Table 11 along with the individual themes from which they were derived. As with the table on nontraditional student themes, the notation next to each individual theme is the first initial of the pseudonym for the participant who expressed that particular sentiment (Ju is used for Juanita). Not every participant had an individual theme fall into each category, but if a category had four or more participants contributing to it, it became one of the six themes.

Table 11

Overall Meaning of Success Themes and Their Corresponding Individual Themes

Getting a better job	Graduation/ certification	Gaining /using knowledge and skills	Not giving up	Being able to do what is expected by college	Transforming their lives
Creating new job opportunities (S)	Certification major step toward	Learning and applying new skills (S, C, Ju, J)	Finishing it, getting it out of the way (S)	Continual process (S, Ju, K)	Desire to continue education (S, C, Ju, V, J, K)
Getting a job (Ju)	professional goal (S)	Proving herself knowledgeable, capable in the field (C)	Not dropping out (S, Ju)	Making good grades (Ju, V, K)	Being an example for her child(ren) (C, J, K)
Gaining a career (C)	Having college graduate status (C)	Passionate instructors imparting knowledge (K)	Giving it a chance (Ju)	Doing what she is supposed to do (S)	Confidence (V, J)
Escape from current job situation (V)	Completing a major goal in life (C)	Being satisfied with what you've learned (K)	From thinking about it to doing it (Ju)	Giving the effort all the way (Ju)	Turning a negative into a positive (C)
Not having to struggle any more (V)	Baby steps (V)		Going to school and finishing it at her age (J)	Putting her mind to it (V)	Being a role model for other mothers (Ju)
Better pay (J)	A degree with the knowledge it represents (K)		Accomplishing your goals (K)		Becoming a better person (Ju)
Getting a career to stay with (J)	Will allow her to work in medical field while in nursing school (K)		Not giving up (K)		Better future (V)

Practical and Personal Themes

Analysis of participants' meanings of success led to two distinct sets of meanings. The first reflects predetermined, career-related goals and consists of: (a) getting a better job (b) graduation/certification, and (c) gaining and applying knowledge and skills. However, conversations with my six participants also revealed a set of meanings that is reflective of a personal journey of change that cannot be measured as a static event. These additional meanings are: (a) not giving up, (b) being able to do what is expected, and (c) transforming their lives.

Another way of distinguishing between these meanings is to view the first set as practical, expected outcomes that participants had upon entering the program and the second set as personal achievements that participants identified and assigned increasing importance to as they progressed through the program.

- Practical Meanings
 - getting a better job
 - graduation/certification
 - gaining and applying knowledge and skills
- Personal Meanings
 - not giving up
 - being able to do what is expected
 - transforming their lives

For instance, not giving up, the meaning about which students spoke most passionately, was not a goal students had going into the program. While some hoped for completion, others came in thinking there was a chance they would not make it. Three of the participants openly stated that they considered dropping out of the program and a fourth expressed near amazement that she did not do so. Not giving up, therefore, became a hallmark of their success. As Julie explained, "I didn't quit. I didn't stop and just say 'the heck with it' and just go get a stupid job making minimum wage."

Similarly, doing what is expected is not something that students took for granted at the outset of their enrollment. Most, in fact, expressed fear that they would not be successful. For some, particularly those who had delayed college the longest, there was a fear of the unknown. For others, there was a fear of what was known—that during labs

they would be giving injections and drawing blood from each other. As Juanita explained, “I was thinking in my head, ‘Oh my God. These people don’t really know what they’re doing. Nobody’s done this and I haven’t either.’” Others simply felt they might not have the time to do what the college expected amidst performing their other responsibilities. As they proved themselves capable of coming to class regularly and making good grades, they came to consider these fears unfounded.

Transforming their lives was another meaning that developed as participants progressed through college. It was also the meaning about which participants seemed to have the strongest feelings because of the impact it could have not only on themselves, but on others near to them. Most said they were nearing the end of their college experience with renewed confidence, feeling that they had empowered themselves to take their lives in a new direction. All indicated a desire to further their education, including Christmas:

It’s just elevated me really in a positive direction. To say if you can do this, go to the next level. What am I going to do now? Am I going to stop here or am I going to go further? Am I going to take it further? Am I going to advance my education? Um, so that’s, that’s what it’s done for me.

Four of the six seemed most excited about their new status as educational role models, primarily for their children, but also for adults who face challenges to pursuing an education. Juanita conveyed that she wanted to serve as an example for other single mothers, while Christmas said she planned to speak to future Career Tech classes as a successful alumnus.

In summary, an analysis of the data collected from participant interviews produced six themes regarding participants’ meanings of college success. The themes fell along the lines of being either practical, career-related outcomes or personal achievements. The practical themes represent expectations that are commonly associated with college success. The personal themes, however, demonstrate how participants looked to the college experience as a way of affirming themselves and changing their lives. These meanings seemed to emerge for participants as they were actually occurring.

Connecting the Themes: Characteristics and Meanings

The final step in exploring participants' meanings of college success is to demonstrate how those meanings may have been informed by participants' characteristics as nontraditional college students. Analysis of the two sets of data reveals that nontraditional student characteristics may be viewed as having either a motivating or discouraging impact on participants' meanings. This relationship is illustrated in Table 12 and explained in the following sections.

Table 12

*Relationship Between Nontraditional Student Characteristics and College Success**Themes*

College success meaning	Nontraditional student characteristic	Relationship
Practical		
Getting a better job	Need to support family	Motivating
	Need for practical training	Motivating
	Desire for personal growth	Motivating
Gaining and applying knowledge and skills	Need to support family	Motivating
	Need for practical training	Motivating
	Desire for personal growth	Motivating
Graduation/certification	Need to support family	Motivating
	Need for practical training	Motivating
	Desire for personal growth	Motivating
	Family support	Motivating
Personal		
Not giving up	Need for practical training	Motivating
	Family support	Motivating
	Self doubt	Discouraging
	Multiple responsibilities	Discouraging
Doing what is expected	Need for practical training	Motivating
	Family support	Motivating
	Self doubt	Discouraging
	Multiple responsibilities	Discouraging
Transforming their lives	Family support	Motivating
	Desire for personal growth	Motivating
	Self doubt	Discouraging

Characteristics' impact on practical meanings. As previously noted, the development of practical success meanings is primarily motivated by nontraditional student characteristics that represent a need or desire impacting participants' decision to

go to college. Foremost, all participants indicated a need to support their families. This was generally perceived to be accomplished through the practical success meanings of getting a better job, graduation/certification, and gaining and applying knowledge and skills. Therefore, the characteristic of need to support family was a motivating factor for each of these meanings.

Also supporting these three practical success themes was the need for practical training. First, participants felt that choosing a shorter training program would reduce the length of time to getting a better job. As Violet stated, “This [medical assisting] was the quickest way for me to get out there and to go to work.” Second, while financial and personal reasons relegated participants to a shorter program, the shorter program made progressing to graduation/certification seem more attainable. Christmas, for example, had reservations that she could “stick with” a two-year program, but felt graduating from the eight-month medical assisting program would be a life changer for her:

I might as well be going to Harvard. I take it the same way because you’re still aspiring to achieve education. So whether I stay seven months, eight months, a year, four years, guess what? I’m still going to party like I graduated from an Ivy-League school, you know.

Participants felt that making the practical decision of choosing a field in which they had a previous interest would help them in gaining and applying knowledge and skills. Juanita, for example, said that as she grew more confident of her skills, she wished that the class hours were longer so that she could learn even more.

Along with the need-based characteristics, a third characteristic motivating practical college success themes was the internally influenced characteristic of desire for personal growth, particularly as it related to the meaning of getting a better job. As participants talked about their personal growth, they often linked it with having a career, and spoke as though they were trying to recapture the opportunity to do so. Violet said she was tired of waiting to start her career. Christmas expressed her need to use her talents in the workplace. For Juanita, having a career would finally allow her to “be somebody.” Accordingly, they also referenced the meaning of gaining and applying knowledge and skills as an indicator of their personal growth. Susan said that before starting the program, “[I] was just doing my little basic CNA. I know how to do more stuff now. It makes me feel good and more skilled as far as what I know how to do.”

Graduation/certification was also mentioned in relation to desire for personal growth, not only as a prerequisite for developing a career, but because it would be an indicator of personal accomplishment. As Christmas said, she would go from being a GED recipient to a college graduate.

A final motivating factor for the practical success themes was family support, an externally influenced characteristic that particularly impacted graduation/certification. For example, Kaitlyn looked to her degreed cousins as role models. Juanita's and Christmas' fathers spoke of the necessity of a college education to their daughters. Participants also acknowledged that emotional and/or financial support from parents and other family members not only allowed them to enroll in college, but to persist to within reach of the certificate of technology, the definitive mark of program success. As single mothers hoping to set examples for their supportive children, they knew that anything short of graduation would constitute failure in that regard.

Characteristics' impact on personal meanings. The personal success meanings were impacted by some of the same motivators of practical meanings, but were affected to the same degree by discouraging factors. The characteristic of having family support positively affected all three meanings. For example, neither Violet nor Juanita could have realized their meaning of doing what is expected, particularly in the area of good attendance, without the childcare that was provided by their family members. Christmas' mother helped convince her that not giving up was the proper course to take when Christmas considered quitting school over differences with an instructor.

Family support also impacted the meaning of transforming their lives because of the importance participants placed on proving themselves to their families, in particular their children. "...to be honest with you, my daughter had always asked me why I never went to college," said Christmas, who admitted that even at the age of 36, she makes sure her father is informed when she makes the President's List for her grades. Even Kaitlyn's 8-year-old son supported his mother. She shared, "As my son tells me every day, 'Mom, I'm proud of you. When are you going to be done with school?'" Julie, as one of two of the six children in her family to graduate high school, was driven to set educational standards higher for her two teenage daughters.

Need for practical training affected the meanings of not giving up and doing what is expected in much the same way as it affected the three practical meanings of college success because these two meanings were prerequisite to gaining and applying knowledge and skills, graduation/certification, and getting a better. Not giving up was facilitated by studying a field in which they had an interest and by knowing that their commitment was short term. Learning in a way that fit their learning needs, via hands-on training that promoted repetition, aided them in doing what was expected.

The characteristic of desire for personal growth can be considered a natural progression to the success meaning of transforming one's life. Both involve change. As participants spoke about personal growth, there was a sense of needing to recapture what had been lost, whether it was the opportunity to establish a career or graduate from college. While career and college graduation represent practical success meanings, the impact of both was certain to change participants' lives, in terms of their capabilities, how they saw themselves, and how others saw them.

Discouraging factors may have contributed to the creation of personal success meanings in two ways. First, personal success meanings developed as the educational experience progressed, not in response to a predetermined need. Second, in talking with the participants, it became evident that being able to overcome discouragers made them feel successful and instilled within them a sense of pride. Among those discouragers was self doubt, which was very evident when participants spoke about not giving up. Unlike graduation/certification, which is what the participants set out to do, not giving up became their goal upon having experiences that made them feel as though they might not be able to finish the program. Not giving up meant overcoming the self doubt that may have been related to issues such as delayed college entry, previous failures, or a general lack of self esteem, as represented by Juanita's "little birdie" who told her she would never amount to anything beyond being a stay-at-home mom.

Self doubt also impacted the success meanings of doing what is expected and transforming their lives because participants began to view themselves differently after conquering their self doubt. While doing the expected may seem like a rather unremarkable goal, for someone who once doubted their abilities, it becomes a major

achievement and source of pride. Julie, depressed by having been fired from three jobs, said she became highly motivated in college:

I could have the mindset that these others kids do, these girls that show up 30 minutes late to class one or two days a week. But they're throwing their own education, their own money away... I'm finally here doing it and I'm going to be here every day.

Christmas speculated on what her life would have been like had she not gone to college:

Had I not gone, what would I be doing now? I don't know. You know, sitting around twiddling my thumbs, as I did before. You know, getting in mess, talking gossip, worried about things I need to do. And I don't know if people on a daily basis ever just put two and two together and realize how things add up. I started going to school, um, which this made me feel better. You know, I just started caring more. ... I got back in church. I started going to Bible Study. ... I was just, you know it's like you're just craving the advancement, knowledge. Just wanting to, uh, the need to just want to better yourself. Well, if I better myself here, I need to better my soul too. So, I might as well just clean it all up. There's a good way of putting it. I just decided to clean it all up.

The second discourager that participants overcame was the multiple responsibilities of college, work, and family. For example, the mental and physical fatigue Susan experienced as a full-time student and employee made her doubt her abilities to finish the program, a point that she made several times during our two interviews. She said, "[I'm] happy that I actually went and finished it, 'cause at first I thought that I wudn't going to be able to do it." Juanita's guilt over leaving her children every day nearly resulted in her dropping out of Career Tech. Most of the participants spoke of the necessity of attending a college near their home in case their children needed them. Violet kept a calendar in order to organize her schedule around work, school, studying, and spending time with her daughter. When asked how her college success had impacted her, she replied with a laugh, "As far as physical exhaustion?"

Summary

Nontraditional student characteristics appeared to inform participants' meanings of college success as either motivating or discouraging factors. Practical success meanings, representing a predetermined need or desire to be fulfilled by going to college, were impacted solely by motivational factors. Personal success meanings, identified by

participants as they progressed through the program, resulted in near equal part due to discouraging factors that participants overcame in their quest for college success.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with profiles individually introducing the six participants in the study. Each profile characterized the participant as a nontraditional student and described her meanings of college success, resulting in two sets of themes. These themes formed the basis for addressing the first research question, What meaning do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?” The question was addressed through a three-stage process. First, nontraditional student characteristics of the participants were synthesized into six commonalities. Second, participants’ meanings of college success were similarly synthesized into a composite of six themes. Then, analysis showed how the participants’ meanings of success were informed by their nontraditional student characteristics.

Because the first research question sought not only to identify goals and expectations that participants brought with them to college, but to understand how nontraditional traits and life experiences influenced these goals and expectations, the analysis took into account the lifeworlds of the participants. Breaking down nontraditional student characteristics into needs, internal influences, and external influences culminating from participants’ experiences facilitated an understanding of what made their meanings important to them. Further, an examination of their meanings revealed they were either of a practical or personal nature and that participants’ nontraditional characteristics could have either a motivating or discouraging impact upon the realization of these meanings. Understanding nontraditional students’ meanings of success, how they came about, and what influences their attainment provides a breadth of knowledge that can guide college administrators in developing initiatives that may address nontraditional student needs at a level that cursory fixes cannot sustain.

CHAPTER 5: CAREER TECH PRACTICES AND STUDENT SUCCESS

While the focus of Chapter 4 was on participants' meanings of college success and how they may have been impacted by participant characteristics as nontraditional students, the focus now turns to exploring proprietary school practices by presenting and analyzing participants' experiences at the study site. This process begins with an overview of the study site, given the name Career Tech for this study, in order to acquaint readers with the natural environment in which participants' experiences occurred and at which most of the research was conducted.

Career Tech practices are explored through the guidance of two research questions: What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of moderately to highly proprietary school students? and How do these practices work to impact the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students? While the previous chapter was organized around individual participants as a foundation for arriving at common meanings of success, this chapter is structured around individual practices as identified by the literature and Career Tech officials. By relating participant descriptions of practices to these common meanings, an explanation of how those practices may have impacted participant success emerged.

Career Tech

Career Tech is a proprietary school located in Houston, Texas. Awarding associate's degrees and certificate credentials, the college had some 650 students enrolled at the time of this study. Established in 2004, Career Tech is part of a group of affiliated companies of privately owned, postsecondary institutions that has campuses in multiple states. Its mission, program offerings, student population, and regulation reflect its status as a proprietary school.

Career Tech has several characteristics that define it as a proprietary school, such as offering career training in a limited number of high-demand fields. Career Tech's mission is to provide career training and to assist students in finding entry-level employment relevant to their training. Offerings are limited to seven career-focused programs based on employment potential. Certificate programs include medical assisting, dental assisting, pharmacy technician, medical insurance and coding, and

cosmetology. Associate's degrees are offered in business administration and criminal justice. Health professions and business management are among the most frequent offerings among proprietary schools. As is generally the case at multi-campus proprietary schools, Career Tech's curriculum is developed at the home office level. However, the campus participates in the process by providing input that it gains through annual program advisory committee meetings. The college's Career Services director, whose office coordinates the meetings, explained, "The school asks what would make the students more marketable."

Career Tech's program delivery is reflective of the accelerated programs which draw students to proprietary schools. Most of the college's certificate programs are eight months in length, with new classes starting every month as both morning and the evening offerings. The medical assistant program expanded during my study to include an afternoon class. While credit hours are based on the quarter term system, academic periods are one month in length for certificate programs. Degree programs are taught over the course of 24 months, with new classes starting every three months. Both morning and evening classes are offered and are held three days a week. Academic periods are three months in length. All programs require full-time enrollment.

The student population at Career Tech also mirrors the enrollment in the proprietary sector. The NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2008 (Snyder et al, 2009) describes the enrollment of two-year for-profits as being predominantly female, minority, and full time. Minorities and females each make up approximately 80 percent of Career Tech's student population, which is virtually 100 percent full time since the college only offers full-time programs. NCES estimates of undergraduate financial aid recipients in 2007-08 indicate that 96 percent of proprietary school students receive federal aid (Wei et al., 2009), comparable with Career Tech's 95 percent. Seven out of every 10 students at Career Tech are in a diploma (certificate) program; about 80 percent of proprietary school students pursue certificates (Berkner et al., 2000).

Career Tech is approved and regulated by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), Career Schools and Colleges Division. TWC is the state licensing authority for the state's proprietary institutions, including for-profit/proprietary vocational-technical schools, (ECS, 2007). The college's degree-granting programs are approved by the

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), Community and Technical Colleges Division. The THECB approves associate of applied science and associate of applied arts degree programs offered at both public and proprietary institutions (ECS). Career Tech is nationally accredited through the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC), which is recognized by the United States Department of Education as a private, non-profit, independent accrediting agency. Some 800 institutions are accredited through ACCSC (AACCS Website). Almost all degree-granting, for-profit institutions are accredited, with about 90 percent of those being nationally accredited.

The Medical Assisting Program

Medical assisting is an eight-month, full-time program which awards a certificate. According to Career Tech promotional materials, the program is designed to train students in both the clinical and administrative aspects of the job, preparing graduates for entry-level positions such as medical assistant, clinical or medical administrative assistant, and medical receptionist for work environments such as hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, home health agencies, and insurance companies. Students learn clinical skills such as measuring vital signs, taking blood pressures, drawing blood, and bandaging, and administrative skills such as inventory control, patient record keeping, and appointment scheduling.

New classes start every month. During my engagement with Career Tech, the program enrolled approximately 150 students. The program is structured into eight, four-week modules, seven of which are spent in classroom and lab training. Classes are divided as follows: Module 1 (entry-level), Modules 2 and 3 (mid-level), and Modules 4-7 (upper level). Each three-course module consists of a lecture, clinical lab, and computer-based course. During the final module, or month, students complete a 160-hour externship onsite in a medical setting provided they meet the 2.0 grade point average requirement. The program awards 44 credit hours; 720 clock hours inclusive of lecture, lab, and externship are required for graduation.

Students have a different instructor for each of the module clusters. Instructors are required to have five years of experience in the field and are strongly encouraged to have relevant certifications. No previous instructional experience is required, although

according to the Allied Health Department chairperson, Career Tech seeks instructors who are creative and motivated. As are all Career Tech instructors, medical assisting instructors are evaluated monthly by their students.

According to the chairperson, most graduates will work in doctor's offices. Although certification is not mandatory for employment in Texas, the college does coordinate testing with the American Medical Technologists (AMT) for both medical assistant and phlebotomy technician certification for students who graduate with a 3.0 or higher grade point average and test with 90 days of graduation. The college also offers test preparation sessions.

The completion rate for this program, as reported to ACCSC in 2008, was 55 percent based on 150 percent of the program length. In comparison, using the same program length, graduation rates for first-time, full-time students completing a degree or certificate at Title IV two-year institutions were 61 percent and 22 percent respectively for for-profit and public institutions for cohort year 2004 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2010).

The Atmosphere

Career Tech is housed in a 43,000-square-foot facility situated in a business-park environment on the outskirts of Houston proper. To me, there is nothing remarkable about its plain, gray structure; on the contrary, to someone used to college campuses plush with green vegetation, the concrete building surrounded by a similarly colored concrete parking lot appears rather drab. The college is not identifiable from the main street the complex faces, but from the side street that the college portion fronts, the sign comes into view. The only other noticeable signage takes the form of numerous "Visitor" signs situated near the entrance to indicate parking space for potential recruits and other visitors. At intervals coinciding with class start and end times, a stream of students can generally be seen entering and exiting the building, most wearing uniforms or logo shirts identifying them as students. Behind the facility, an outdoor student area is the scene of sporadic activity as students take their class breaks.

The inside of the facility reveals a personality that is dualistic in nature—part business and part educational institution. Career Tech's walls showcase both modern art and playful bulletin boards. Polished plants and educational displays alike adorn the

hallways. A “Wall of Fame” presents identically framed photos that upon closer review are accompanied by the unique stories of successful alumni.

Career Tech houses networked classrooms, computer labs, and specialized labs dedicated to the respective fields of study. I visited the campus a total of 16 times during the course of my research. During my first visit I was at once struck by the cleanliness and orderliness that one would expect from a business environment—from the smudge-free front doors to the immaculate restrooms, from the classroom postings indicating class meeting times and instructors, to the centralized student break room. My afternoon visits usually corresponded with the schedule of the classroom custodian, whose courteous knock at the door I came to expect at around 5:00 p.m.

As an educational institution, the campus exudes positivity, accountability, and friendliness. In addition to the ones on the Wall of Fame, photos and testimonials of graduates are clustered by program of study throughout the campus. Bulletin boards promoting graduation are noticeable and posters on job interviewing techniques are prevalent. In the reception area non-stop promotional videos show potential students what they can accomplish by coming to school here. Alongside a grouping of photos of outstanding instructors is a huge poster informing students what they should expect of their instructors. Among the dozen or so expectations are that instructors should demonstrate subject knowledge, explain the class syllabus, provide one-on-one assistance, encourage questions, and relate the class to actual job experience. The staff made me feel at ease, allowing me to walk freely throughout the building unaccompanied. During any given visit, I would cross paths with recruiters touring potential students. They would smile in recognition and keep moving.

As Gadamer (1982) suggested, each of us has preconceived ideas coming into any new situation. Of Career Tech, given its status as a proprietary school, I honestly expected more and less—more aggressiveness and less structure, more untidiness and less openness. Instead, I encountered a business environment that appears to value and expect professionalism and a personal atmosphere that communicates a philosophy of outreach.

Research Question 2: Practices Relevant to Success

A data analysis is presented within this section to address the second research question, What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of moderately to highly proprietary school students? The rationale for this question was twofold: (a) to reveal what proprietary school practices are being used by nontraditional students, to what degree, and why; and (b) to determine whether some practices are more relevant than others, and why. Based on the literature, questioning centered on three areas of proprietary school practices: (a) student services, (b) instruction, and (c) information. The data derive primarily from the second of two interviews held with each participant, supplemented by a questionnaire covering all three areas of practices (see Appendix C).

Student Services

To begin the conversation on student services, participants were presented the list of services which appeared on the Applicant Information Form they had filled out as prospective study participants (see Appendix A). This list, designating with a “✓” those practices which participants had checked on the Applicant Information Form as ones they had used, appears as Section 1 of the supplemental questionnaire (see Appendix C). Participants were given the opportunity to confirm their choices and were then asked to describe their experiences with those services. They were asked which services they had used most and why. If a participant spoke about a practice from the list but had not checked it, I confirmed that she had meant to check it.

Student services that were used are identified in Table 13. The initial list of practices, as seen on both Appendices A and C, contained the services of advising/counseling and tutoring, but neither was checked by any of the participants. As the president of Career Tech pointed out, advising/counseling is part of the admissions function at Career Tech, but he suggested that I keep it on the list to see how students would react. From talking to participants, it became evident that any tutoring generally took the form of staying after class to talk with the instructor. Although not technically a student service, the choice of met with president/program chair was added at the president’s request. The choice of “Other” was also provided, but none of the participants added any additional practices.

Student services are arranged on Table 13 in the order in which they elicited the

greatest response from participants, which paralleled frequency and intensity of use. Orientation is indicated for every participant because attendance at this event is a requirement at Career Tech. When three participants did not check orientation on their Application Information Form, I asked them if they had attended. All confirmed that they had. Services used by four or more participants will be explored in the following sections.

Table 13
Participant Use of Career Tech Student Services

Service	S	C	Ju	V	J	K
Career services	x	x	x	x	x	x
Admissions	x	x	x	x	x	x
Financial aid	x	x	x	x	x	x
Orientation	x	x	x	x	x	x
Library	x			x		x
Met with program chair/president		x	x	x		

Career Services

Career services was not only among the most widely used student services at Career Tech but was the most frequently and intensely used one. There are two likely reasons for this. First, as participants indicated in their profiles, they attended Career Tech with the goal of training for a career-related job. Secondly, and perhaps most contributory, is that a career development course sponsored by the Career Services Department is part of the medical assisting program. It is taught as a 16 clock-hour course that awards 1.5 credits. Because it is taught to upper-level students who are clustered into Modules 4 through 7, the module in which a student takes this course is dependent upon when the student started the program.

Based on its course description, Career Development provides practical applications of job hunting, in which students are taught resume writing, interviewing, setting employment objectives and career goals, networking, and effective communication. The course is included in all of Career Tech's allied health programs. It is taught by the module instructor, who is supported by Career Services Department staff. Participants' descriptions of their experiences with Career Services mirrored Career Tech's description of the career development course. As Susan recalled:

They teach us how to do, uh make a portfolio, like uh, taught us how to prepare a resume and cover letters and they taught us how to do references. Also, we had different practice interviews, mock interviews.

That was after we completed the resumes and the portfolios, we did a practice interview, so we had to come to school dressed up and they practiced us on the interview as far as how we looked and stuff.

Kaitlyn described the class as follows:

You do a mock interview. You do, you set up your resume, your portfolio. You set all that up and they grade you on the resume. Teachers are there to help you, get it all, you know, they know how they want it done, so, and then you have to email it to Career Services, and then they set up mock interviews. And you have to dress like you're going on the actual interview and everything and it's an actual mock interview and I did get it, I was just nervous in mine.

While career services was mainly discussed in terms of what was taught in the classroom, participants also mentioned other services offered through the department. From Christmas' viewpoint, the department's semi-annual career fairs set Career Tech apart from other proprietary schools. She had just attended a fair prior to our first interview and had actually attended one at the invitation of a recruiter before becoming a student.

They're [Career Tech] the only school I know of employers come to them. 'Cause even though I didn't go to other schools to physically see them, I called other schools. I inquired on other services. And they're the only ones I know of. They all have career services because they all have to help place you, but they're the only ones I knew of where the employers come to them to view their students. So I thought that was a definite plus for them.

Julie and Susan noted that Career Tech Career Services representatives came to senior meetings, which are held during the students' last module on campus, to help students prepare for their externships. Juanita said she regularly checked job postings, which are found in the Career Services offices and in the college's break room. She had also stopped by to get information packets, which contain job postings and informational items such as upcoming job fairs at various locations. These postings are generally for part-time employment and are updated every week, said Career Tech's Career Services director. Kaitlyn, who as a community college student said she was more accustomed to seeking out services, also recalled visiting the office. "... I've gone in there and they will go over interviewing files, they'll interview with you, help you practice, so when you do go for an interview, you just have to go by, set up an appointment," she said. Kaitlyn

admitted however, that she had yet to find the time to take full advantage of those services.

The Career Services director stressed the importance of establishing a relationship with students early on by being present in the classroom and throughout the campus. This is facilitated by a staff of five, including the director, equating to an overall ratio of one career services professional for every 125 students. Three advisors are responsible for two departments each and the fourth works with one department and handles job postings. While students attested to this relationship, I noted through observations the strong presence of career services on campus. Among the first things I noticed during my initial walk-through of the campus was the abundance of posters promoting interviewing skills with titles such as “How to Dress for a Job Interview,” “Enthusiasm—the Key,” and “Interview Tips and Etiquette.”

Career Tech strives to make it clear that while it provides job placement assistance, it does not guarantee jobs for its students. This is noted in the catalog, the application and enrollment agreement signed by students, and in a video presentation shown to students prior to enrollment. The participants acknowledged that finding a job was primarily their responsibility but they expected support from the Career Services Department. Said Violet, “... if I have difficulties finding my own employment, they say they will be there and I hope that they are and I guess that’s one of my expectations.” Kaitlyn explained, “... they’ll help you find a job and everything as well. Help you send out your resumes and stuff like that. They won’t place you, but they’ll help you look.” Christmas was hopeful that her externship would lead to a job so that she would not have to use the department’s services at all.

The Career Services director described the job search process as a “50/50 partnership.” The department generates job leads, sets up interviews, and submits resumes on behalf of the students as necessary. Its goal is to place students within 60 days of graduation, but it will continue the process on behalf of a student for up to one year if necessary. Placement rates are monitored closely. In the director’s office a white board bears placement statistics from various campus locations affiliated with Career Tech, including Career Tech’s 72 percent rate for its medical assisting program. Above them is written, “Friendly competition fosters success.”

Admissions

The second most frequently and intensely used of all student services was admissions. This is partially because all of the participants as potential students had met with an admissions representative, also known as a recruiter, at Career Tech. In addition, five of the six participants indicated an ongoing relationship with their recruiter.

First encounters. When persons inquire about Career Tech, they are assigned a recruiter who then contacts them to set up a visit to campus. Despite the aggressiveness commonly perceived regarding proprietary school recruitment practices, participants described their visit as a welcoming and informative experience. Most came to Career Tech knowing that they wanted to study medical assisting and two had all but decided that they were going to enroll at Career Tech. Regardless of how far along they were in the decision making process, their first impression of Career Tech was the deciding factor. Three aspects of their first visit were particularly relevant to them: (a) how they were treated by their admissions representative, (b) the campus tour, and (c) the program presentation. Most gauged their experience against either what they had heard about other institutions or what they had experienced upon visiting or contacting them.

Christmas chose Career Tech over two other colleges she had visited—one a proprietary school, the other a community college. She was turned off by the unkempt, noisy atmosphere at the proprietary school and by the disinterest she received at the community college. At Career Tech, she experienced “a very warm receiving” from a recruiter whom she described as professional, friendly, and informative. Although her recruiter was persistent, Christmas felt that she was being encouraged, rather than recruited. She said, “And he’s like, now’s a better time than any. Just encourage, encourage, you know, and just give me all these words and thoughts.” Juanita who initially visited “just to look at the school,” felt similarly encouraged. She recalled that her recruiter led her to a testimonial on the campus’ Wall of Fame from a widowed mother of three young children who graduated from Career Tech. “He told me the story reminds me a lot about you and the situation that you’re in,” Juanita said. Like Christmas and Juanita, Kaitlyn wanted to see how she would be treated before making the decision to attend Career Tech. She recalled:

My recruiter was very straight forward with me in the beginning. And he did a really good job and I refer, like if I talk to people I tell them to go talk to him because he's straight-forward and honest and he'll tell you you will be doing injections and everything like that and drawing blood ...he doesn't not tell you and he'll give you a tour of the school...

Violet described her initial visit as “nice,” but said that she would have enrolled anyway. She recalled, “He [the recruiter] was like, ‘OK, you can do this, this, and this.’ And I just went for it. I was ready to do it and get it over with and not have to worry about waiting tables anymore.” However, Violet mentioned that she had passed on another college after being treated rudely over the phone. Julie also came in ready to enroll, but said that if she had not been made to feel comfortable, she would not have enrolled. Julie had previously visited a community college, but based on what she felt was a lack of information and help with the FAFSA, she “never went back.”

According to its Admissions director, Career Tech has a multi-step process through which every recruiter leads potential students. Most of the students only recalled only two: the program presentation and the campus tour. The five-minute video shown as part of the program presentation helped solidify participant's decision to study medical assisting, as most had already had knowledge of the field. The video features students receiving instruction and practicing skills in the lab setting. It describes the program as “fast, comprehensive, and hands-on.” Interviews with graduates who are currently working in the field are also featured.

During the tour, potential students are shown the campus, including the medical assisting labs, and are introduced to graduates via the Wall of Fame, which features some 40 graduates with their testimonials of Career Tech. They meet instructors and campus administrators who are available. While all participants said that the tour provided them a comfort level with Career Tech, for many it also gave them a realistic sense of what to expect from the medical assisting program. Christmas recounted that during her tour, she was introduced to a variety of college personal, including the president; was told about the school's accomplishments, including its accreditation; and was shown the facility's classrooms and labs. She recalled afterwards viewing the video and discussing the program with her recruiter. While Christmas already knew she wanted to study medical

assisting, hearing the details about the program and viewing the labs made her a little hesitant.

I knew right off the bat it looked hard. I'm going to be honest with you because it was just like when Mr. [sic] showed me around and I saw the skeletons and I saw the bones I was *lah, lah*. And, and so truly, to be honest with you, just doing the walk-through and just doing the initial, um, the, you know, touring the school, was kinda overwhelming. I was like, man, is this really what I want to get myself into?

She recalled telling her recruiter about her fear of needles, to which he replied that she would overcome it because she would get a lot of practice.

All of the participants said that they felt well-informed about both the college and the medical assisting program. Susan said that viewing the video on the program confirmed her decision by showing her what she would learn in the program. "That was something that I was interested in—giving shots and doing patient charting and drawing blood," she said. Juanita said that between the video and the tour, "they told me everything we were going to be doing. Um, computer class and everything hands-on. They're like, there's no surprises." Like Christmas, her decision to enroll was made with the understanding that the program could be difficult based hearing the school's requirements from her recruiter.

A crucial aspect of the tour was the school's physical appeal. Most of the participants spoke of the cleanliness and organization of the campus. Said Julie:

I was very impressed with the campus. The look of professionalism. The labs were very neat like a doctor's office and well laid out, phlebotomy chairs in the back and stuff. So yeah, I was very impressed with my overall tour of the school, um, it being a small, you know, a small school. Not a big huge campus that you normally think of college as, so yeah I was very impressed.

From her tour, Violet determined that the campus was clean, the labs were well stocked, and the instructors were nice. Added Susan, "I liked the way the school had looked—nice and clean. I liked that how the medical assisting program looked."

While participants recapped their experiences in terms of what they had learned about Career Tech, few mentioned the interview in which Career Tech seeks to learn about recruits in order to establish whether the college is a good fit for them. "If they are not ready, we don't want to put them in a worse situation in life," said the director of

Admissions. Some of the participants recalled, although not in detail, that their recruiter had asked them if they were in a position to commit to a full-time, eight-month program. As Christmas explained, her recruiter “asked the necessary questions about daycare, children, work, all of that. He wanted to make sure I had everything covered.” Most of the participants did recall that their recruiter wanted to make sure that medical assisting was what they really wanted to study.

Three of the participants recalled enrolling the day of the visit; the remaining three said that they enrolled within the next couple of days after gaining results on their entrance test or the amount of their financial aid award. However, according to the director of Admissions, while persons can become applicants during the visit they cannot enroll until they have had ample time (at least two hours) to review the application and enrollment agreement, a 12-page document outlining policies on areas such as tuition, transfer credit, and job search services. It is likely that most at least applied the day of the visit, because they did recall testing and meeting with the financial aid representative, steps that can occur upon making application.

According to the Admissions director, about 70 percent of recruits will enroll at Career Tech; 60 percent will apply the day of the visit. When I asked the director what it is about Career Tech that convinces potential students to enroll, his answer paralleled what the participants had described. He responded, “[It is] the way the school presents itself, the comfort level students feel, the open-door policy, and the openness and welcomeness of students and faculty members.” He added, “A lot of people are committing to them [the students] on day one. It makes them feel secure.”

Ongoing relationship. At Career Tech, the recruiter who recruits a student to the campus becomes that student’s representative for the duration of their enrollment. As Juanita explained, “When you come in, the first [person] that registers you into the system, that’s basically the person that you go to for, if you need any help.” The Admissions director seemed to be forthright about recruiters’ role of soliciting enrollment, yet he expressed adamancy that once recruits become students, the focus then turns to retention. He said that all representatives are expected to be visible and accessible to their respective students, particularly during what he described as the “fear and adjustment period.” That period, said various campus officials, is the first one to

three months of the program during which students are more prone to drop from the program.

All of the participants indicated that the recruiters had a strong presence. Some said they had noticed during their early modules that recruiters would come into class to check whether certain students were present. Most said their recruiters had stopped them in the hall or came into class to check on them and other students they had recruited. Kaitlyn said that her recruiter followed up with her all the way through school. “He actually ordered from my son’s school fundraiser,” she said. Christmas indicated that her recruiter was not only present, but expressed an interest in her wellbeing as a student.

I see him all the time walking through the hallways and then he always comes and checks up on me. He always wants to know how I’m doing. Uh...he is always willing with issues I’ve had, but I’ve only had one major bump since I’ve been here and he was very proactive in helping me get through that and making sure it was resolved and checking back with me about it.

Christmas’ “bump” was an incident in which she said her instructor accused her of cheating when she shared a paper with other students in the class. Christmas said she was operating under the assumption that the instructor had wanted her to help the other students, but found out differently when her paper ended up in the president’s office. Although he wasn’t directly part of the resolution, which saw Christmas and the other students being exonerated, Christmas felt that by listening to her concerns and staying abreast of the situation, he was supportive.

Susan said that she received calls from her admissions representative asking how school was going for her. “They’ll call you and check and see how you’re doing and if you need anything or uh, check and see if everything was going OK in the class,” Susan said. “She called a few times.” Even Violet, who stressed that she had never needed any type of student services, conceded that her admissions representative was there if she needed him. She said that during her first week of school, he checked on her not only while she was on campus, but also called her at home.

Well they’re very persistent, which I guess in some cases is not a bad thing. My advisor is [a] nice guy. I’ve never really had an issue I’ve had to take to him, but he does inform me at least once a week that he’s here to help me if I need it. So he’s very vocal in wanting to be able to help me if I do need it. I haven’t needed any assistance from him.

Julie, despite being adamant that she had had no contact with Admissions after her initial visit, recalled that when she was having difficulty with her financial aid representative, her recruiter intervened. “My recruiter was like, ‘Go home and get your stuff and come back,’ and I didn’t have to deal with that lady again. I dealt with another lady that was in there.” She also recalled that one of her classmates worked with her recruiter when she had difficulty getting her transcripts from a private high school she had attended.

According to the Admissions director, students are required to see their recruiter after they have completed the first month of the program. None of the participants referred to such a visit and it was unclear whether informal meetings may have been used to meet this requirement. While the participants overall seldom sought out their recruiters, they seemed to have a sense that their recruiter would be available for them. During my visits to Career Tech, I came to recognize many of Career Tech’s recruiters whom I frequently saw touring potential students or speaking with current ones. I saw many of them at an orientation session I attended. During my brief periods spent in the reception area, it was a common occurrence for students to come in and ask to speak to their recruiter.

Financial Aid

All of the participants in the study were financial aid recipients. Most referred to their experiences with the Career Tech Financial Aid Office as a being quick and easy transactional process. I got the sense that participants saw receiving financial aid more as an integrated expectation and less as a service. Without it, they simply would not be college students, as Juanita expressed:

And that’s one of my main, uh, one of my concerns was to have the money taken out of my pocket, for me to pay for myself at school. So I did expect for me to go to a college that was going to help me out and that’s what Career Tech has done for me.

Most described the financial aid process as one that occurred when they first entered Career Tech and that they had mentally dismissed until when their student loans would become due. Visiting with a financial aid representative is, in fact, part of the application process. As Susan explained, “The Financial Aid Office, you just only see them one time only when you go through school and get your financial aid, but other than that you don’t really see them again.” Violet’s experience was very similar:

Financial Aid obviously helped me get funding for the class, and I met with them I think two times, no more than five minutes either time. I'd fill out the paperwork and the next time I saw them they told me how much I was awarded. It was really quick and simple.

In listening to the participants describe their experiences, I sensed that they did not have a thorough understanding of the process. This was particularly demonstrated by Violet's and Juanita's recall of the process. Said Violet:

I know when I sat down with my advisor, I answered a lot of questions and signed and filled out a lot of things. So, and I also know that when I went online I actually filled out some things, but I'm not sure if that was for financial aid or for admissions.

Juanita also spoke in generalities:

I went and I met with the financial aid uh person, uh, I can't remember her name, but she helped me just fill out a whole bunch of papers and told me what I had to do. And, uh, she was, the school was going to help me pay for my college and I didn't have to pay [until] six months after I graduate. So, that's good for me.

One likely reason for this lack of detail in participant recall is that Financial Aid Office staff complete the application for students. "We hold their hand," said its director. "They don't know the difference unless they've gone to another school." The department's ratio of one representative to every 100 students facilitates this individual attention. When students first visit the campus, they are shown a three-minute video, which describes Title IV federally funded student financial student aid, including grants, subsidized loans, and unsubsidized loans. Students then schedule a follow-up appointment, at which time they bring in the necessary financial information in order to process the FAFSA. The school has software that downloads the application to the U.S. Department of Education and provides an instant estimate of student aid.

Two of the participants had previous experience with the financial aid process. Kaitlyn, who had to transfer her financial aid from the community college she was also attending to Career Tech, found the department to be very responsive to her needs:

Um, it's you have to fill out the FAFSA and they'll fill it out right there with you, and I already had mine filled out so we had to go in there and we had to change the school code on there. And um, they're very helpful in helping you figure what you need to do, how to set up your payments, if you have to make payments if you don't qualify for a lot of financial aid

and student loans. Um, so they do help you, and they are very useful and helpful.

Julie, who had experienced difficulty in completing financial aid forms as a potential community college student, also had an issue at Career Tech. “I couldn’t file for financial aid if I had filed my taxes a certain way, or something like that. I couldn’t do that,” she recalled. She described the first lady she spoke with as “real snotty” but said that during her second visit, “everything went smoothly.” Julie expressed disappointment that she did not qualify for a greater amount of aid, a topic which pervaded our conversations on financial aid. It seemed that those participants whose experiences with the financial aid process were more complicated remembered them more clearly. Christmas said her paperwork was done twice, which was frustrating, but resulted in a positive outcome. She described her experience as follows:

... when I had first started out, and it goes based on your income and your W-2’s and all that good stuff, it was determined that after everything was paid and after I got my grants and loans, that I would still owe some monies. And at the time there was a pending situation, as I said at my job, I had concerns with that. And they did all that and they were able to work it out so this is what I need to pay every month and I said, “OK, no problem.” And then they actually ended up coming up to me later on. The paperwork had to be redone, 2008-2009, and as a result of that, when they redid those, it turned out I didn’t owe anything. Finally, um all I had to pay was like \$175. Um, and that was it.

All of the participants, regardless of whether they knew exactly how they received their aid and loans, did seem aware that they would have to pay back their loans and under what conditions this would be done. Susan, Juanita, and Julie, in fact, alluded to this several times during our interviews.

Orientation

As noted earlier, orientation is a requirement at Career Tech. However, it did not seem to leave a lasting impression on the participants. As Christmas said, “It seems like so long ago, I just forgot about it.” New Student Orientation is held each month for all new students who will be starting classes the following week. All of the participants recalled that members of the college staff and faculty introduced themselves to the students, and most remembered being told about expectations the college has of its students. Said Violet:

They gave you a t-shirt and asked you to show up for an hour and just went over what, I guess what they expected from their students. And their guidelines. You know, things that would be tolerable and not tolerable and that kind of thing.

Kaitlyn presented the greatest recall:

Um, there was a room full of people, and they, like the campus president at the time, he spoke and then the others spoke. Career Services, I believe, spoke and then each department, like PT, Pharmacy Tech students, their instructor spoke, and then MA's. All the instructors spoke and they said what you needed to have to start that next, that Monday. And uh, what not to wear. Whatever, the uniform dress code, stuff like that.

She said she was taken to her classroom and met the instructor she was going to have for the first module.

During the course of my research at Career Tech, I attended one orientation session. The event's message was one of expectations—both of the students and the college. The president spoke at length and representatives from student services and academic departments spoke briefly. The president expressed awareness of the challenges facing students and urged them to seek help when needed. The Admissions director informed students that recruiters and instructors alike are evaluated based on the number of students who graduate. He and the Allied Health Department chairperson informed students that should they miss a class, they would receive a phone call. Students were also shown a video on sexual harassment, visited their respected classrooms to meet their instructors, and picked up their textbooks and supplies. They were presented a letter from the president and handouts from various departments, including contact information and hours of operation.

Summary

The student services practices found to be the most relevant by participants were career services and admissions, which participants reported having the most frequent and intense experiences. The practices of financial aid and orientation, experienced by all participants as incoming students, were seen as being less relevant to their ongoing college experience. The level of use for each of the student services was fairly consistent from participant to participant because in most cases, they did not seek out the services. The services came to them. Career Tech's Career Services Office sponsored a mandatory

class on career development. Recruiters assigned to participants when they were potential students became their school representatives and maintained a relationship with the participants. The financial aid process was integrated into the application process and orientation was mandatory prior to starting classes.

The relevance of career services was directly related to participants' primary reason for attending college. They expected Career Tech not only to train them for a profession but to provide assistance in finding a job. Because the Career Services Office had already begun working with them toward that end, participants saw this service as being relevant to their college success. Participants saw admissions as having a long-term relevancy that began even before they were students. Most indicated that their decision to attend Career Tech was positively influenced by their recruiter. Once they became students, their recruiters were accessible and seemed concerned with their well-being.

Instruction

Unlike student services, which are distinct and may be used by students to various degrees, instructional practices are enmeshed into one complex process. While students may not be able to choose these practices, there may be some that students feel are more relevant than others and that they can both recognize and assess. Because one focus of Research Question 2 is on relevance of practices, I set out to understand which instructional practices were important to participants and, from among those, which ones they felt were prevalent at Career Tech.

Participants were asked to rank the importance of five instructional practices from a prepared list which appears as Section 2 of the supplemental questionnaire (see Appendix C). The list derived from my experience in advising community college students and developing evaluation instruments for continuing education courses and was informed by literature on adult learning (Knowles, 1990). Three entries on the list of instructional practices have the commonality of being dependent on the instructor, while the remaining two are more logistical in nature. Participants were instructed that a ranking of 1 represented the most important practice while a ranking of 5 represented the least important. Therefore, as displayed in Table 14, those practices with the lowest total points are those that were deemed most important by participants,

The choice of “Other” as the final entry on the list of practices gave participants the opportunity to list any additional aspects of the instructional process that they deemed important. They were also told that if a listed practice had no importance to them, they could choose not to rank it. It was stressed to participants that they consider how relevant the practices were to them, not how Career Tech delivered them. Once practices were ranked, participants were asked to discuss whether and how they had experienced them at Career Tech.

The focus of this exercise was not on developing an ordinal ranking; rather, it was to get participants to think about what was important, with the list of practices serving as a visual aid, not as a delimiter, as they spoke about their experiences with instructional practices. Not only did all participants indicate that each of the listed practices was important to them (despite having assigned rankings to them), two of them suggested that an additional practice involving instructors’ use of strict discipline in the classroom had relevance to them.

Table 14

Importance of Career Tech Instructional Practices to Participants

Practice	S	C	Ju	V	J	K	Total
The instructor is knowledgeable and helpful	5	2	1	1	1	1 ^a	11
The information is taught in a way that suits student’s learning style	2	4	2	3	4	1 ^a	16
The student knows what is expected	3	3	3	2	5	3	19
The classes are conveniently scheduled	1	1	5	4	3	5	19
The classroom/lab feels comfortable	4	5	4	5	2	4	24

^aKaitlyn indicated that the first two aspects were of equal value to her.

Instructor-dependent Practices

Table 14 indicates that instructor-dependent practices were very important to participants. Yet, what this table does not illustrate is the interdependency these practices

share. Conversations with participants indicated that there was no clear-cut delineation between practice of having knowledgeable and helpful instructors and the remaining instructor-dependent practices. This relationship will be explored in the following section.

While all of the participants said that they had experienced all three instructional practices at Career Tech, these experiences were not described as being consistent during the course of their instruction. Three participants mentioned that there were problems early in their attendance with teacher absences and turn-over. Four said that compared to their final instructor, the others were less skilled. Medical assisting students generally have the same instructor for Modules 4-7, but four of the participants had a different instructor for Module 7 due to their class being split into two sections. Among them was Violet, whose estimation of her previous instructors plummeted as a result. “In my seventh months with my current instructor, I feel like I’ve gotten more of an education with her than I did with the previous [ones],” she explained. When I first spoke with Violet she had nearly completed her sixth module and stated that her instructional expectations had “for the most part” been met. Her subsequently diminished level of satisfaction confirmed for me how one experience can impact the meaning of another. Julie, who also had the new instructor, shared Violet’s opinion to a slightly lesser degree. Kaitlyn and Juanita stated that while they had learned more from the new instructor, they were satisfied with their previous instructors.

Knowledge and helpfulness. Instructor knowledge and helpfulness served as the common connector for participants who described a linkage among instructor-dependent practices of instruction. Three of the participants associated instructor knowledge and helpfulness to knowing what is expected of them. Christmas, for example, said that if her instructor is knowledgeable and helpful, she will then know what to expect. Juanita said that in order to impart expectations, an instructor must be knowledgeable.

How is she going to be able to help me if she doesn’t even know, uh, what she’s telling us to do? So I just feel like it’s very important to me for the teacher to know what she’s doing to be helpful to any questions that I have or any problems that I have with the lab or the classroom.

Juanita also linked instructor knowledge and helpfulness with having information taught to suit her learning style. “I like it to be where it’s scheduled,” she said. “OK we’re

going to do this at this time, organized. I like to be taught that way.” Kaitlyn said that a knowledgeable and helpful instructor would be able to address not only her learning style, but those represented by a diverse classroom of students. This reflects her opinion as noted on Table 14 that having information taught in a way that suits her learning style was equally important to having a knowledgeable and helpful instructor.

Neither Susan nor Violet linked instructor knowledge and helpfulness with other instructor-related practices. Susan said she considered a knowledgeable and helpful instructor to be one who not only answers questions, but encourages them. Violet’s independence came across as she expressed the importance of having a knowledgeable instructor:

I can set my own goals and figure out what I need to do. But if the instructor doesn’t know what they’re instructing, I won’t get the education I need. The main thing is that they’re, that they know what they’re doing. You can be a great teacher and not know what you’re, you can be a great speaker to a group of people and not be able to get the information and the knowledge passed on.

All participants said that their instructors had been helpful, while most said that they were knowledgeable. Regarding the knowledge of their instructors, participants were prone to talk about instructors’ practical experience in the field. Christmas said she was surprised by the knowledge and experience of her instructors: “So you realize it when they’re teaching you and then they start giving you examples as time goes on, like ‘When I worked here,’ ‘When I managed this office,’ ‘When I did that.’” In speaking of the instructor who taught only the final module, Kaitlyn said, “... our last instructor, she had been a surgical nurse and everything and she had been teaching for a long time, so she was really very knowledgeable.” Violet said that she was considering coming back following graduation to sit in this instructor’s classes to make up for the lack of information in previous classes.

When participants spoke of helpfulness, they generally talked about having one-on-one time with their instructor and being encouraged to ask questions in class. These practices were helpful for Julie, who admitted sometimes having a hard time grasping concepts and always wanting to know not only how, but why.

You get a one-on-one if you need it. They’re there to answer somewhat, you know, a one-on-one question. If you have a concern or you don’t understand something..., they were there for that.

Susan said she appreciated that her instructors initiated help by encouraging her students to ask questions:

Um, she's helpful as far as if we have anything that we're confused about. We can ask questions if you don't know. There was, she was real talkful about that. A bunch of students in the classroom needed certain things [and] she would be like if you need any help, come and ask questions. She said it never hurts to ask a question. It's always better to ask a question than it is to do it and not know how to do it.

Instruction that suits their learning style. Having instruction that suits their learning style was first addressed by participants when we discussed why they chose Career Tech. A theme that emerged at that time was the need for hands-on training. This need was reiterated when we discussed the instructional aspects of an education. Participants stressed that they were visual learners, with some specifically stating that textbook-based instruction did not suit their learning needs. "I just don't have that kind of time to sit and read," said Susan, who added that to properly perform her duties during her externship or on the job, she needed hands-on experience. Kaitlyn explained that with her ADD, she was prone to fall asleep while reading. For Juanita, reading presented comprehension issues.

Most of the participants said that they were receiving hands-on experience at Career Tech. Said Kaitlyn, "... I expected, you know, to have the hands-on and the learning and we did that. Right away we did hands-on and learning the stuff." Juanita was pleasantly surprised by her instructors' hands-on approach. "I really did think that it was just going to be sitting down, reading off the book just like it was in high school," she said, "but it wasn't nothing like that when I came here. You actually get to practice on people and do everything hands-on..." Participants described how they were required in each module to perform a certain number of procedures such as venipunctures and injections, and how repetition gave them a higher comfort level in doing them. Among them were Christmas who overcame her fear of needles, and Julie, who said her anxiety about treating real patients began to lessen in her seventh module.

I have definitely calmed down especially with drawing blood. I'm not so leery of hurting somebody. Or with these girls you spend seven months with, you're like, "I don't want to hurt you. Did I do that too hard? Did that hurt?" From being that to just knowing that you have to go there to get it done.

All of the participants said they were looking forward to the externship as a way of augmenting what they had learned and to experience first-hand what would be expected of them in the actual work setting.

Participants who studied under the new instructor discovered that in addition to hands-on instruction, they learned well in an interactive environment, even when that environment included lecture. While previous modules had one hour of lecture per week, the final module had lecture every day. “In this seventh mod we did two hours of lecture a day,” explained Julie. “You get that instructional, you know, that talk. And you sit with her and interact and ask questions.” Violet said this method allowed the instructor to cover more ground on a variety of topics that were on the minds of students. Kaitlyn liked having input into the learning process, which included submitting questions for exams. “So it’s like a review and it’s interesting to see what students, what we pick, what we [sic] thought someone really needed to know or whatever it might have been. It was really, it was really nice.”

Knowing what is expected. As stated earlier, some participants felt that an instructor could be knowledgeable and helpful only if that instructor was able to communicate expectations. On its surface, the basic rationale for knowing what is expected is simply being able to *do* what is expected. Yet participants also saw it as an opportunity for personal growth. As Violet explained, “I’ve got to set my own goals and if I don’t know what they’re expecting, I don’t know what they should be.” Christmas stated that the effect of knowing expectations would be a greater accountability on her part.

Knowing what’s expected of me is very important, because no matter how well accomplished the teacher is, if I don’t do it, all that doesn’t matter, you know. She or he can’t make me successful. I have to do it for myself. So knowing what’s expected of me is definitely, definitely important. Um, and just making myself accountable and making sure that I’m completing the task needed so that I can succeed.

Julie admitted that it was in her nature to know why a task must be done or done in a certain way. She also felt that by receiving plenty of feedback, she would be better prepared to enter the workforce.

As participants discussed their experiences at Career Tech, they talked about routine, lesson plans or syllabi, and having instructors willing to re-explain processes to them when they were not sure what to do. As persons with obligations outside of school, having a routine in areas such as knowing what days were test days, helped them set aside study time. For example, Susan set each Wednesday lunch hour aside for studying because Thursdays were test days. She said, “I know what’s expected of me when I go to school there, what I’m supposed to do. It’s like an everyday routine.” Juanita said that having a syllabus allowed her to look forward to class:

Like now she’s given us a schedule what we’re going to be doing every day when we come to class so that way you don’t be, um, thrown off the whole day and asking “Oh, what are we going to do today?”, when you can easily read it and it’s right there in front of you. So that way, you can bring all your materials to class and be prepared.

Most participants said that their instructors, given their experience in the field, were able to explain expectations for the workplace, which in turn, helped participants to understand what they were expecting in the classroom. They were also able to demonstrate and explain procedures, repeatedly if necessary. Julie and Violet felt that while their instructors were responsive to students, they could have gone further in communicating expectations by providing greater feedback on their class work, as did their final instructor.

According to most participants, Career Tech instructors also communicated expectations beyond course content. Participants explained that instructors expected students to be present, on time, and attentive. Said Christmas:

Um, so the teachers...they make it clear from day one, “You’re here for a career, you’re here ‘cause you want to be better. I’m here to do that for you. If you allow me to do that, I will give you the tools, the instructions, the lessons, the work to do that. It is up to you to do the rest.”

Institution-dependent Practices

Table 14 indicates that institution-dependent practices seemed less relevant to participants, but as participants began to talk about these practices, their recall seemed to remind them of their importance. While class schedule was initially deemed more relevant, classroom/lab comfort generated the greatest amount of conversation. A third institution-dependent practice, cohort class structure, often surfaced in discussions as

being relevant and will also be discussed in this section.

Class schedule. Having a consistent schedule throughout their attendance facilitated participants' ability to get to class because they were able to plan their lives around their classes and vice versa. As with financial aid, I got the impression that class scheduling was something participants had not thought much about since enrolling at Career Tech, but it was something that was nonetheless critical to their attendance. Susan, a mother who attended during the day while working at night, explained why having convenient hours was important to her:

...I don't want to jump into a school with me not knowing the hours with me already having a lifestyle outside of school. So I needed to know [that] the hours of the classes is more convenient for me before I jumped into the program.

All of the participants planned their schooling around their children's school schedule, babysitter availability, or both. In addition, Violet and Susan also worked evenings and Kaitlyn was an evening community college student.

Because class times had been a consideration in their decision to enroll in Career Tech, participants felt that their classes were conveniently scheduled. Incidentally, most saw the program not as a collection of classes, but more as a single class. This is likely due to consistent class hours; a seeming absence of term breaks; the cohort structure whereby students have the same classmates throughout the program; and having one instructor per level, rather than per class. Each module within each of the three levels consists of a clinical-, a computer-, and a lecture-based class. Explained Juanita:

It's one whole class but there's three different things that we have to do. There's uh, every Wednesday we have lecture. That's uh an added class, but we have uh workbook time, which is right when we get into class is workbook, then we go to computer and clinical.

Christmas remarked, as if it had just occurred to her during our conversation, that while classrooms may change within each module and instructors may change between modules, the schedule stays the same. "I know when you first go into school, I gotta know," she recalled. "It was important to me that I had something that worked around my schedule."

Classroom/lab comfort. Having a comfortable lab or classroom evoked a variety of meanings. In listing this practice, I had the physical environment in mind, given my experience with students' concerns over physical comforts such as the temperature and seating. The three participants who addressed the question from the physical standpoint said that they could adapt to their environment. They included Susan, who in her usual literal style described a physical discomfort not typical of most classrooms:

It's really not comfortable having someone stick you in the arm trying to draw blood, but that was part of the program. You teach on each other. You don't have little dummies, rubber arms, and stuff. So we all had to stick each other.

Talking about classroom comfort brought to mind for participants things that make them feel uncomfortable in class, all of which were based on experiences at Career Tech. Disruptive students and the size of the classes were the most common complaints, but participants pointed out that Career Tech had addressed the issues. Christmas said that immature students who do not take the classes seriously can impede the learning process. "... others that are silly and are not as mature as you can make it difficult. Uh, but the teachers, even in those instances, will use that, point that out. You know, 'This is for your benefit. I'm trying to teach you.'" Juanita, the youngest of the participants, had an issue with a student older than her who was talkative and would not keep to himself. She said that after the teacher talked to the student he settled down:

But I felt like that's important for me to feel comfortable in class cause if someone's not going to be making me comfortable, why would I want to be there sitting with them and just listen to a whole bunch of nonsense? It's wasting everybody's time. We're here to learn, not to be like little kids. Like this is our career that we want to be studying and going into.

Three of the participants commented on the size of their classes, each recalling that Career Tech had initiated afternoon classes after the morning classes became too large. Said Kaitlyn:

... we had um, we have too many students in the classroom, like the bigger class, we had to divide them up. We did have a bigger class come in like two or three months after I started, whatever it was, they had to split them up. Because the rooms are designed for so many students so you want it to be a comfortable site.

Despite the complaints, all of the participants said they were pleased with their classroom

and lab facilities, which were among the reasons they had decided to attend Career Tech. Julie, who recalled being intimidated the first time she saw the labs, said that the organization of the labs allowed her to find her way around and that it was exciting to use the same equipment and supplies that professionals use.

Cohort class arrangement. Students progress through Career Tech's medical assisting program as part of a cohort. Because participants were not asked to comment on this instructional practice, it was not directly addressed by them and is not listed on Table 14. However, various benefits of this instructional aspect were brought up by participants and it became apparent that participants depended upon one another to navigate through the program, both academically and emotionally. Christmas spoke of mentoring the younger students while Susan said that the group of ladies she started the program with provided information to anyone among them who missed a class. Most expressed gratitude for having classmates who were willing to be "stuck" as they grew to overcome their fear of needles and the possibility of hurting others as they were learning. Said Juanita, "That's one thing that really helped me out is the students. 'Cause if you don't have students that volunteer for you to do what you need to do, then, it's going to be a lot harder, 'cause then you don't get to pass your class." In terms of personal support, Christmas, Juanita, and Susan all spoke of how, when they were considering dropping the program, their classmates' were concerned and encouraged them to stay in the program.

Summary

Among instructional practices, the three instructor-related ones were considered more relevant to participants, although participants indicated that all practices held relevance for them. There was much overlap between the instructor-related aspects, with knowledgeable and helpful instructors pervading the remaining two—having information taught to suit their learning style and knowing what was expected—as an antecedent or co-requisite for them. Participants often equated knowledgeable and helpful instructors with their practical experience in the field and accessibility to students. Overall, participants seemed more consistently impressed with instructors' helpfulness than with their level of knowledge. The practice of having information taught to their learning style equated to hands-on training for most participants, which they indicated was

experienced early and often at Career Tech. They said that it helped them overcome anxieties associated with certain tasks such as drawing blood. Some participants also mentioned that instruction incorporating their input was important, although that form of training seemed to be more limited. The practice of knowing what was expected from their instructors allowed participants not only to respond accordingly in class but to create expectations for themselves. Participants indicated that for the most part they understood the expectations of their Career Tech instructors.

Institution-related instructional aspects did not initially seem to be top of mind compared to instructor-related ones, but they were nonetheless relevant for participants. Class scheduling was something participants considered upon enrolling at Career Tech and counted on over the course of their enrollment. Having a set schedule allowed them to manage their multiple responsibilities of school, work, and parenthood. The aspect of classroom/lab comfort produced a variety of meanings, mostly reflective of participants' experiences at Career Tech. Participants were comfortable with the physical attributes of the lab, which were also partially responsible for their decision to enroll Career Tech. Overcrowding and disruptive students were mentioned as issues that were taken care of by the college. Participants also saw relevance in the cohort class arrangement, which seemed to generate both academic and emotional support among classmates.

Information

The practices through which participants received information from Career Tech are the focus of this section. Participants were asked to select practices that they had been exposed to at Career Tech from a prepared list which represents Section 3 on the supplemental questionnaire (Appendix C). This list contained common means of communication, taking into consideration how research characterized proprietary school communications (Kinsler, 2006b). If a participant did not initially indicate a practice, but referred to it during the interview, I then confirmed that they had used it and included it in the table. Participants were encouraged to mention any additional sources of information. The practice of on-campus communications was not on the original list and was added after most participants described it as the primary means of communication. Upon selection, participants were asked to describe experiences with the practices they had selected and to indicate whether and how the practices were relevant for them.

Table 15

Methods Through Which Participants Received Information From Career Tech

Method	S	C	Ju	V	J	K
Mailings	x	x	x	x	x	x
Student handbook/catalog	x	x	x	x	x	x
On-campus communications	x	x	x	x	x	x
Telephone	x		x	x		x
Email		x	x	x		

Informational practices did not elicit much conversation among the participants. Two possible reasons emerged. First, even though the participants indicated that the information they received was adequate, they also conveyed that the amount of information was small. Christmas summed up her thoughts as follows:

You have to take into consideration it's not the biggest school in the world, you know. I mean there's not a whole lot going on, you know, which is fine. Uh, because you go to every school for the reasons you go, so if you wanted excitement and events, you would go to school for that. But I'm not there for that. My purpose to be there is just really to go to school.

While Christmas seemed to be referring to event-related information, the small amount of information may also be related to institutional practices limiting its need. For example, students do not need registration information because they are automatically registered each month if they are in good standing with the school. Similarly, there is no need for textbook information as all students receive their textbooks during orientation. As Juanita described, "They just register you for everything. You just register that first time before you start school, and [sic] they just tell you, 'OK. You're registered. You don't have to reregister.'"

A second possible reason is that the participants did not appear to consistently avail themselves of the information that was disseminated. Participants who had received limited information from a particular source consequently had limited recall of that use.

The student handbook/catalog is an example of this. All of the participants said that they had at least scanned it at the beginning of school, but only Juanita indicated that she continued to refer to it. The 65-page book is primarily dedicated to information about admissions, financial aid, programs of study, and policies. It also includes an institutional overview and an academic calendar. E-mails are another example of how information may have been disseminated but not used. Only half of the participants spoke of receiving emails, with two recalling any specific content. The fact that three participants indicated limited computer access may have contributed to this lack of consistency.

The two ways participants were most accustomed to receiving information were on-campus communications and mailings. On-campus information was usually disseminated through meetings or postings. When asked how she received information, Susan responded, "Probably the meetings, cause usually they don't really mail out nothing to let you know something happened. They don't really call to let you know, or the handbook don't really say, so usually the meetings. They usually tell us at school."

The meetings generally referred to by participants were those held monthly for all medical assisting students and the senior meetings held weekly during the last three weeks of Module 7. The monthly meetings, which some participants referred to as "awards ceremonies," are an opportunity to honor students for their achievements and to share information related to the program, such as career fairs and certification exams. Awards are given for previous month's grades and perfect attendance, including President's List (4.0) and Director's List (3.75-3.99). Seniors who are finishing Module 7 are pinned. Senior meetings were described as being more informational in nature and geared toward making sure students are prepared for the externship, particularly in terms of what to expect and how to conduct themselves. Just after my research began, special meetings were held around campus to introduce students to the new campus president.

Participants also referred to various postings around campus as a channel of information, from the weekly job postings from Career Services to events notifications posted throughout campus. "Like there are flyers if they're having a career fair, or stuff like that," said Julie. "If you want it, you can find it." During my many visits to campus,

I noticed various postings related to events such as a career fair, senior photo day, orientation, graduation, and tuition payment deadlines.

While mailings were frequent, they were mainly related to financial aid and came from Sallie May rather than Career Tech. Only one participant recalled getting something different, which was a letter welcoming her to Career Tech. Although phone calls were reported by the majority of the participants, their purpose was not so much to disseminate information as it was to inquire about the student or offer assistance.

In summary, participants did not indicate substantial use or exposure to informational practices. However, they also did not indicate a lack of information. Given the small size of the institution, participants felt that their information needs were being met through on-campus communications, primarily through monthly meetings, which many referred to as awards ceremonies.

Summary

Provided in this section was an analysis regarding how participants viewed three areas of proprietary school practices: (1) student services, (2) instruction, and (3) information. Described were the practices used, the degree of that use, and the relevance participants attached to those practices. Of the three areas, student services and instruction were described by participants as being most relevant. Information practices seemed least relevant, with the exception of on-campus meetings in which information was personally disseminated. In the area of student services, participants had the greatest interaction with career services and admissions functions and considered both relevant to their college education. The instructional practice most important to participants was knowledgeable and helpful instruction, which all participants said they had experienced, albeit somewhat inconsistently.

Research Question 3: How Practices Impact Success

This section provides data analysis to answer the third research question, How do these practices work to impact the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students? The rationale for this question was: (a) to obtain rich descriptions of proprietary school practices; (b) to promote students' reflection of their educational experiences as a conduit to their success, thereby arriving at the essence of

those experiences; and (c) to obtain lived experience accounts that can inform college leaders as to how and why practices impact students.

To answer this question, I first needed to find out how participants gave meaning to college success, which was the focus of Research Question 1. Then, it was important to know which practices they used and found relevant. This was the focus of Research Question 2. Research Question 3 brings this study full circle by presenting practices identified by participants as having impacted their college success and then connecting these practices with the meanings of success that emerged from the participant profiles in Chapter 4.

Proprietary school practices were categorized as student services, instruction, and information. Table 16 lists all the aspects of each Career Tech practices that were discussed with participants, arranged by depth of discussion elicited by each one.

Table 16

Career Tech Practices Discussed With Participants

Student services	Instruction	Information
Career services	The instructor is knowledgeable and helpful	On-campus communications
Admissions	The information is taught in a way that suits student's learning style	Mailings
Financial aid	The student knows what is expected	Telephone
Orientation	The classes are conveniently scheduled	Student handbook/catalog
Library	The classroom/lab feels comfortable	Email
Met with program chair/president	Cohort class structure	

Practices Impacting Student Success

For each of the three areas of proprietary school practices, participants were asked which, if any, practices had impacted their success in college. Participants' initial answer was that career services and having knowledgeable and helpful instructors were most

important to their success. They also felt that admissions was significant to their success. As Research Question 2 revealed, participants were greatly exposed to these practices and found them to be relevant. The question remained regarding what it was about these practices that impacted participant success. As participants connected their success with these practices, three common facilitative elements emerged: (a) information, (b) encouragement, and (c) convenience.

Career services, admissions, and knowledgeable and helpful instruction are examined in the following three sections through participants' perspectives of how these practices impacted their success by providing information, encouragement, and convenience. Within the fourth and final section, other practices which also incorporate these facilitative elements will be explored. Table 17 provides an overview of the practices and the elements within them that may have aided in the facilitation of participants' college success.

Table 17

Practices Contributing to Participant Success and the Facilitative Elements Within Each

Contributory practice	Facilitative elements
Career services	Information
	Encouragement
	Convenience
Admissions	Information
	Encouragement
	Convenience
Knowledgeable, helpful instructors	Information
	Encouragement
	Convenience
Monthly informational meetings	Information
	Encouragement
	Convenience
Cohort class structure	Information
	Encouragement
Financial aid	Convenience
Convenient class scheduling	Convenience

Career Services

Participants expressed that they were both informed and encouraged through their interactions with career services. Because the Career Tech Career Services Office facilitated a mandatory class in career development, it also constituted a convenient student service. Participants described a kind of metamorphosis occurring through their career development class which made them feel more confident in themselves and their ability to find a job. Their recall seemed to exemplify a major goal of Career Tech, as described by its Career Services director. “We promote self-sufficiency to the student,” he said. “Most do not have the tools to do it on their own.”

Participants often compared what they did not know prior to the class with the new information the class provided, particularly in regard to resume development and interviewing skills. Said Susan: “I already had a resume, but, uh, with them teaching us how to do the font and format and what to put on the resume, it made it look full. It made it look a whole lot better than the one I had prior.” Julie had a similar experience:

I got to perfect my resume where it looks professional and uh, to do that mock interview was *really*, really helpful in the aspect of, like I said, how to dress that day. Was that appropriate? The things you say when they ask you questions—what you should say, what you shouldn’t say. And how you sit, you know, posture, eye contact, you know.

Referring to the class as a “career developer,” Julie said that she also learned the importance of taking additional steps, such as sending a thank-you note after the interview.

Career services practices positively addressed the self-doubt experienced by many participants because they not only helped them identify and document relevant abilities, they also gave them the confidence to promote themselves to potential employers. For instance, Juanita learned the importance of describing herself as bilingual on her resume and to not be shy in presenting her qualifications.

Like OK, so they’re actually preparing me for what is expected out there whenever you go in for, for a job interview and always bring a resume and bring all your, all your, uh, certificates that you have gotten, every mod that you have completed, just go ahead and put that in there. So that helped me a lot.

For Julie, class activities served to calm her anxieties about interviewing.

I mean when you go for an interview you’re already nervous. You’re afraid you’re going to blunder, you know, babble or what have you. Ms. [sic] helped me to loosen up and not be so tense and stuff. And kind of what to say, what not to say. And not to keep going on and on, you know. Babble, babble, babble.

Participants described a sense of accomplishment as a result of the career development class, with some mentioning the grades they had received on their portfolio, resume, and interview. I got the impression that participants felt empowered by the process. Said Julie, “With them showing you things like how to be prepared to search for a job, supporting you, it gives you hope. It gave me the confidence I needed to finish.”

Career Tech's career services also impacted participants' success by motivating them to have learning as their focus, as Kaitlyn explained.

Um, you know, they [Career Services] say the 4.0's are nice to have, but if you don't know, like somehow you are still getting the 4.0's but you don't know what you're doing, then what are you going to give to that employer? Your grades are important. It does look good, you know, for them to see that you have those 4.0's. But you need to make sure you know what you are doing. You need to make sure you understand it. Ask questions when you don't know.

Career Services also taught participants the importance of having personal as well as technical skills in the workplace. Christmas explained that the additional insight made her more marketable.

... they're teaching you how to present yourself, how to speak, how to handle yourself, so they definitely have a hand in impacting your success. So, in that aspect, yes, the school will give you the knowledge and here's a nice pretty bow to tie it all up in (laughs), so to speak.

Many said that the knowledge they learned would help them excel on their externship, which for some could lead to a paid position. As Christmas put it, externship was an opportunity to "show what you know." Kaitlyn, who had actually begun her externship by the time of our second interview, stated:

... during extern every day I've been there early. I think one day I was there 15 minutes early. You know, just, I just know I need to be there early and not be getting there right at the time the office opens. You need to get there early, be there. And just to be responsible. It has taught you that.

As participants recounted their experiences with career services, the importance of convenience became apparent. Only two mentioned that they had visited the college's career services offices, one of whom was Kaitlyn, who said that she did not have time to take full advantage of the services due to time constraints. With career services being part of their program, students had no choice but to take advantage of this practice, at least to the extent of taking the career development class.

Admissions

As with career services, participants felt both informed and encouraged by their experiences with admissions. And because their recruiters were present and available,

this student service was also convenient for them. As participants addressed the admissions function, specifically relative to their success, encouragement seemed to be the overwhelming factor. Their recruiter made them feel as though they mattered, a process that began during their first visit to Career Tech. Also, regardless of the extent to which they actually relied on their recruiter, participants seemed to feel that they could do so if necessary.

In response to questions pertaining to Research Question 2, participants described their initial encounter with their recruiter as one that helped them make an informed decision on whether to attend Career Tech. They were shown a video, received a tour of the campus, met members of the staff, and had their questions answered. But information was not the sole motivator. When participants discussed their meanings of college success, a common theme that emerged was one of not giving up. Some acknowledged that this experience could not occur without them first gathering the courage to enroll in college. Although two participants came to their campus visit with the idea of enrolling, others needed some encouragement to do so. Among them was Juanita, who stated that her recruiter and the people to whom he introduced her on the day of her visit provided that encouragement.

... they gave me the 'courage to come to school. And uh, that just, it's all I really needed was just the encouragement for me to come and make it. Them telling me, "Ah, don't listen to that person. It's OK. You'll be fine."

Christmas said that without the encouragement she received from her recruiter, she would likely have gone home and talked herself out of enrolling.

As participants talked of their ongoing relationship with their recruiter, they spoke of it as being both supportive and genuine. Of her recruiter, Kaitlyn stated, "He was really good. You don't find a lot of people like that these days." When asked to elaborate, she stated:

'Cause recruiting's kind of like sales. Once they get you to buy something usually, in my opinion, that's it. They don't, they don't want to, they don't keep following up with you. Not unless they're trying to sell you something else. He wasn't trying to sell me things. He was just asking how school was going. Everything like that.

Juanita said that seeing her recruiter several times a week gave her confidence and kept her motivated. Her fears that she would not amount to anything dissipated were transformed into a feeling of acceptance.

He's always, he's always coming up to me. He sees me when I enter the school and he actually stops me and tells me, "[sic], how's your day today? If it's not good, it's OK. It's going to get better tomorrow. Every day's going to be a different day." So he always, he always put a smile on my face every time when I come to school. He makes it seem like he cares for me to be here every day. And not to let anybody stop me.

For Susan, having her recruiter check in on her made her feel as though the college cared about her success and that she had made the right choice in enrolling at Career Tech.

... they were thoughtful, and nice of 'em to call 'cause I guess most of those schools just try to get the students throwed in there any kind of way and just try to get your money and you know, don't even call to check and see how you was doing. So, you know, that was thoughtful and nice of them to call and check, cause I guess you have some schools that don't even do that.

Christmas' recruiter actively played a role in her not giving up when he stayed abreast of her "bump" in which she was accused by an instructor of cheating. During that ordeal, Christmas said that she had considered quitting the program. However, the support from her recruiter, along with that of family, friends and classmates, motivated her to stay in school. Of her recruiter, she stated, "So, in my opinion, he goes over and above."

Knowledgeable and Helpful Instructors

Having knowledgeable and helpful instructors was very important to participants, and even though it wasn't experienced consistently, participants still credited this aspect of instruction as being contributory to their success. To the extent to which it occurred, having knowledgeable and helpful instructors made participants feel informed and encouraged. It was also made learning convenient, in that instructors were accessible to participants both during and outside of class hours.

Participants felt informed because they had multiple instructors and each of those instructors had real-life experience in the field. This allowed participants to learn different methods in performing skills and different perspectives on what is important in the workplace. As Christmas explained:

... I think even though they're not all going to teach necessarily the way you like, that you get a little bit of what you like in addition to something new, which is always good, because you know in the real world, hey, we're all different. So you've got to learn it many, many different ways and in the end, I think that that would only be beneficial to um to know and to have things brought to you in different formats.

Said Kaitlyn, "... instructors have different things to bring to the table that is knowledgeable and helpful that is really good." Julie acknowledged that gaining knowledge from different knowledge sources was preparing her for a variety of work environments.

Because so much of the learning experience was hands-on, participants valued the real-world experience of their instructors. They communicated a trust in their instructors to teach them what was relevant in the field, as evidenced in Juanita's explanation of why having a knowledgeable and helpful instructor was so important to her.

... the teacher's teaching me what she knows and how to be professional in the medical field and um, how to do certain things instead of just guessing on it but um, that's helped me because I know what I need to do with injections and stuff and how to (pause). I didn't know how to do injections. She taught me that. I didn't know how to do blood pressure. I didn't know how to do the EKG, the massage therapies, and everything. I didn't know how to do that.

Most of the participants indicated that they were seeking hands-on instruction when they enrolled at Career Tech. For them, the combination of having an experienced instructor within the lab environment facilitated their learning. Said Susan:

Because without me being there, with the teacher showing us how to do shots and different stuff like that, I would have never known how to do it. So that was helpful with lab, 'cause like I say, I'm more of a hands-on person than I am just looking at the book. So, the lab and the teacher being helpful, that helped me out a lot with knowing how to draw blood and give shots.

As a result of the help and encouragement they received from their instructors, participants felt that their instructors were looking out for them, which motivated them and made them to start thinking more positively. Julie said that consistently getting encouragement from her instructors inspired her to keep going. She said, "...the teachers and instructors are always [saying] 'Good job,' 'You're almost there,' 'You're doing it,' and 'You're going to get there.' They have done nothing but lifted me up." When Susan

was having trouble during the first few months of her training, her instructor at the time spoke with her about her grades. “She knew I worked, but also told me how important it was that I do good in school,” said Susan. “She said to come to her when I am having any problems with school and stuff.”

Acknowledgement of a job well done was also important to most participants, as Christmas explained:

It’s not you’ve got to pat me on the back every so often and tell me I’m doing a good job because it’s your job to do a good job. But just acknowledging, “Hey, I see you’ve come a long way”, or “Hey I wanted to tell you good job for thinking of this or doing that.” Um, and they [the instructors] do.

When participants were asked about relevant instructional practices, most of them indicated a linkage between instructor knowledge and helpfulness and at least one of the other two aspects of knowing what is expected and being taught to suit their learning styles. As participants associated practices with success, the linkages carried over, as exemplified above in Susan’s description of how her instructor addressed her learning style by providing hands-on training. Knowing what was expected was quite often linked to instructor helpfulness, or encouragement, and hence to participants’ success.

Kaitlyn said that having her instructor prepare her for externship was encouraging.

... the teachers, you know, they stay positive and they, you know, encourage you. They tell you things to not do in a doctor’s office, you know, the doctor may not like this. You need to be careful and you know, and watch how you talk and just be very respectful, just be very presentable every day. So in that respect, they do, they do encourage you. That helped. That helped. I was excited. I couldn’t wait to get done and start my externship.

Kaitlyn, who was prone to miss class during her first attempt at college and admitted to a less than perfect attendance record at her current community college, said that she also learned the importance of both attendance and punctuality from her instructors.

Teachers didn’t like you be tardy, you know, they didn’t want you being tardy...late. Um, so yeah, it just, I mean, what I got out of this really is to be there on time and not be running late. ... you made a commitment, you need to be there at school. It’s not just, “OK, I don’t want to show up today.”

Christmas recalled having an outburst in class that resulted in her instructor counseling, rather than reprimanding, her. During that exchange, Christmas was given a set of expectations that encouraged her to see herself as a leader.

And I was just really frustrated and I could tell she, you know, attitudes start to flare, and uh when the class was done or whatever, I later apologized and she told me, "Christmas, what you have to realize is that people are watching you. You may not realize it, and you may not want to be the leader, but unfortunately, you are the leader. People are looking at you because they're seeing what you're doing. They're seeing how you carry yourself, how you talk, how you act, whatever the case may be, and so I just want you to know that. I want you to be the leader in the class for me." We kind of laughed about it and talked about it and I said, "I'll do my best. I'll do my best."

For Juanita, having expectations allowed her to look forward to school.

I come with good energy, like OK what are we going to do today? But I already have my syllabus and I know what we're going to do so I'm prepared to [go to] school. And um, I'm just like "great." I'm very confident coming to school every day. I wish it was Monday through Friday. Get more hours in and more learning, but it's not like that.

In addition to providing information and encouragement, the instructors were also accessible. All of the participants indicated that they had reasonable access to their instructors, with some stating that they would often stay after class to have things explained to them. Christmas stated, "They didn't mind taking out time one-on-one even in their own time to talk to me, even to give me, uh, extra help. So that was very important. I always had the impression they had my best interests at heart." As a student who needed to understand why, rather than merely how to execute a procedure, Julie said she appreciated having access to her instructors after class so that they could re-explain procedures to her.

A lot of them have to come back to teach night class. They would hang out and ask if we needed help. I had a couple of times that I had to stay after and ask questions or whatever, but just concerns on some issues or concerns, what have you. I got what I wanted out of them as far as the attention I feel like I deserved, you know, to ask.

Contributions of Other Practices

Each practice linked by participants to their college success incorporated the facilitative elements of information, encouragement, and convenience. Yet while these

three elements were not collectively found within every practice on campus, participants felt that they were nonetheless pervasive throughout the campus. All participants except Violet said that they were made to feel successful by Career Tech as a whole, and even Violet said that she observed the eagerness of staff to help students.

One practice incorporating all of these themes was the monthly informational meetings, about which participants spoke enthusiastically. First, they served as the primary source of information. Participants felt they benefited from the face-to-face interactive nature of the meetings through which they learned about upcoming processes and events that impacted their success in the program. Referred to by participants as awards ceremonies, they were also a major source of encouragement. It was evident that all of the participants had been recognized. For some, awards were an expectation. “Each month, you get certificates for perfect attendance, for 4.0,” said Christmas. For those who struggled, awards were less frequent, but impactful. “I liked the awards ceremony,” said Susan. “I actually got a couple of awards, so I liked that.” Julie remarked that students who make the President’s List get a photograph with the president. “It gives you hope,” she said. During my last visit to Career Tech, I noticed the college had installed new showcases in their student lounge. In them were photographs of students receiving their President’s List certificates. I recalled during one campus visit watching a group of senior medical assisting students who had just been pinned leave the building dangling Mylar balloons. The meetings were also convenient in that they were incorporated between classes and therefore required no extra effort on behalf of participants to stay updated on relevant information.

Information and encouragement also resulted from the cohort class structure utilized by Career Tech. Participants described how over the program’s seven-month period, a comradery developed among students who had quickly discovered that the learning process included performing a number of sometimes painful procedures on each other. Students also kept each other informed in the event of class absences and helped one another in class. Most of the participants, including those who were experiencing doubts about staying in the program, indicated that the friendships they developed with classmates provided much-needed encouragement.

Convenience was apparent in two practices that participants had considered important when enrolling at Career Tech, but had not thought about much since. Without financial aid, participants simply would not have been college students. Without convenient class scheduling, they may not have been able to sustain their enrollment. Financial aid was convenient from three standpoints. First, students received one-on-one assistance in applying for financial aid, so the process took only minutes. Also, as a one-time transaction that was part of the enrollment process, its completion represented one less thing for participants to deal with while in school. For Juanita, not having to worry about paying for school allowed her to focus on her studies.

It helps me a lot to concentrate in class 'cause I really don't have to worry about it. I don't have to worry about 'Oh my gosh I need to, I need to pay my class, I need to pay this much. I don't have the money, what am I going to do?' So I like Financial Aid a lot and they helped me with, um, getting to school now 'cause I don't have to stress over it.

Finally, having a designated financial aid representative made it convenient for participants to ask questions if necessary. As Kaitlyn explained, "... my financial aid counselor—she knows who I am—she says hi to me. So I do like that."

Class scheduling was convenient to all participants, and was, in fact, the only practice that Violet attributed to impacting her college success. "I need a convenient schedule to go around my daughter's schedule," she said. "So, being day classes and I'm out in time to pick her up obviously is very important." Having a consistent schedule allowed participants to establish a routine in their daily lives—which in all cases were scheduled around the lives of others—for a period of eight months. As Juanita explained, "The schedule that they have for me is great for me, I mean I have, it starts at 6, and I know somebody's going to be there taking care of my kids..." Said Susan, "I knew I worked and I couldn't do it with me knowing I needed to work at night, so I needed a morning, so that worked out pretty good."

A Sense of Community

As participants spoke about Career Tech's impact on their college success, the conversations did not always lead to specific practices. As many participants indicated, there was just an overall sense that Career Tech would help them become successful. Kaitlyn described it in this way:

They are there saying, “We’re here, we’re here, we’re here.” And at [the community college she was attending], you have to, you have to, you know, walk around, you kind of have to figure out what they have, find out what they have, when you sign up for your classes, talk to your counselor.

Her experiences confirmed those of Juanita, who stated:

Sometimes I do wish that I would have gone to a community college. Sometimes I don’t, because I’m happy here. But over there I know I’m not going to have that many people telling me, like not pressuring me, but encouraging me to do good in school, like they are here.

What created this sense may have been the atmosphere of community that Career Tech provided, with the college having more control over some aspects than others. While integrated practices such as admissions and career services were deliberate and well acknowledged by participants, others may have been deliberate but more subtle. For example, along with the cohort class structure, having one instructor teach three classes in one module simplified class attendance and made students feel part of a group of their peers. Further, Career Tech lessened the need for cultural capital and decision making by taking care of processes such as student registration each term and providing information as students needed to know it. Still, other aspects were not direct offerings but rather a reflection of proprietary school characteristics. For example, being a nontraditional student in an institution of primarily nontraditional students may have contributed to participants’ sense of belonging. Juanita spoke of how she fit in because many students were single mothers. Christmas noted the comfort level she had with her instructors, which she felt was due in part to her age and maturity.

Summary

This section shared participant perspectives regarding how Career Tech practices impacted their college success. Participants directly identified career services, knowledgeable and helpful instructors, and admissions as having impacted their success, yet their descriptions of the informational practice of monthly meetings were illustrative of how this practice may have been contributory as well. Each of these practices had in common the facilitative elements of information, encouragement, and convenience.

Participants felt very informed by Career Tech Career Services and as they became more informed, they also became more encouraged. They felt that their new

knowledge would help them perform better on their externship, be more effective in their job search, and ultimately be more professional as a medical assistant. Its strong presence in the classroom made this service very convenient. Admissions, by being informative, played a role in getting participants enrolled, which in and of itself was a major step toward success for many of them. Encouragement and accessibility became the prevailing elements within the admissions function that impacted participants' success as students. Given their presence on campus and interest in students, recruiters made participants feel as though they belonged at the college and that they had someone they could turn to for information or support if necessary. Participants indicated that the information and encouragement they received in class was the result of having knowledgeable and helpful instructors who had experience in the field. Participants had a sense that their instructors wanted them to succeed and were looking out for their best interests, which contributed not only to the provision of information and encouragement, but provided accessibility.

Participant descriptions revealed that information, encouragement, and convenience were prevalent throughout the campus, not only in the practices they directly identified as impacting their college success. For example, the class cohort structure worked to both encourage them and keep them informed, while class scheduling and financial aid provided important conveniences. Participants indicated that Career Tech projected an overall sense that they would be successful, a feeling that may be attributable to an atmosphere of community present within the college.

Connecting Practices to Success

At this point, practices impacting participants' college success have been identified, along with facilitative elements common to each of them. In this section, those practices are presented as having a causal relationship with the meanings of college success that emerged from participant profiles in Chapter 4. This connection is illustrated in Table 18.

Table 18

Career Tech Practices Impacting Participants' Meanings of Success

Meaning of college success	Career Tech contributory practice
Getting a better job	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors
Gaining and applying knowledge and skills	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors Cohort class structure
Graduation/certification	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors Admissions Informational meetings Cohort class structure Conveniently scheduled classes
Not giving up	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors Admissions Informational meetings Cohort class structure Conveniently scheduled classes
Doing what is expected	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors Admissions Informational Meetings Conveniently scheduled classes
Transforming their lives	Career services Knowledgeable, helpful instructors Admissions Informational meetings

Career Tech Career Services had influenced or was expected to influence all of the meanings of college success established from the student profiles. Although participants had not yet gotten a job in the field, the knowledge and skills they learned in the career development class made them feel confident in doing so. Completing the class put them logistically one step closer to graduation and motivated them to remain enrolled and perform well in their other classes in order to progress toward that goal. Participants felt that learning about expectations—of their externship sites and potential employers—

was important to them someday meeting those expectations. Having newfound skills and a greater awareness of their abilities motivated them to not give up. Finally, career services appears to have transformed their lives by making them feel more skilled and more confident individuals in regard to both seeking and maintaining employment.

Knowledgeable and helpful instruction, although less consistent than some would have liked, also impacted each of the meanings of success that emerged from participant profiles. Participants indicated that the information and encouragement they received from accessible, experienced instructors had already impacted their ability to gain and apply knowledge and skills and motivated them to keep trying until they mastered skills and knowledge. As they came to realize that they could do what was expected, participants began to see themselves as individuals capable of transforming their lives. All of the participants were in sight of graduation/certification and felt that after externship they would be prepared for a job in medical assisting.

Admissions impacted four of the success themes. By providing encouragement, Career Tech Admissions Department staff helped participants establish a sense of belonging within the institution, which transformed how they saw themselves and what they were capable of achieving. In turn, they were motivated to not give up and to work toward graduation/certification. The information provided by recruiters prior to their enrollment and the practice of checking on their attendance helped participants establish a set of expectations for themselves.

Monthly information meetings, also impacting four college success themes, were talked about as an activity through which participants' achievements were recognized and expectations were defined. For participants who came into the program doubting their capabilities, this continued acknowledgement and the provision of necessary information eased their progress through the program to graduation. Participants said that the meetings were an opportunity to have their efforts acknowledged, gave them hope, and made them feel better about themselves, suggesting that the meetings had an impact on transforming their lives. Participants looked forward to the meetings and worked toward being recognized at the conclusion of each one-month term. It is therefore conceivable that the monthly meetings impacted participants' success meanings of not giving up and doing what is expected.

Each of the aforementioned practices had all three facilitative elements of information, encouragement, and convenience. Those practices with fewer elements seemed to impact student success to a lesser degree. The cohort structure of the classes, with students working together and supporting each other over a prolonged period of time, appeared to help participants with applying knowledge and skills and also provided the encouragement to not give up, which could ultimately lead to graduation. The consistent class schedule allowed participants to not only plan class attendance, but to schedule time for assignments around their busy lives, therefore allowing them to do what was expected. Any changes to class scheduling might have resulted in increased stress or even in lack of program completion due to an inability to attend classes. Therefore, it is possible that this practice impacted the meanings of not giving up and graduation/certification. Financial aid, although possessing the facilitative element of convenience, is not included here because while it may have made a difference in whether a participant enrolled, it did seem to impact success. It was a transaction made upon enrollment that was not revisited by participants, unlike having convenient class times, which was something they experienced every day.

Summary

In identifying Career Tech practices impacting their success, participants pointed to those to which they had the most frequent and intense exposure, which also happened to be those they considered most relevant to them as college students. Those practices were (a) career services, (b) admissions, and (c) knowledgeable and helpful instructors. The three facilitative elements common among these practices were: (a) information, (b) encouragement, and (c) convenience. All of these elements were found in informational meetings and some were present in the practices of cohort class structure and conveniently scheduled classes, making these practices possible contributors to participants' success although they were not directly identified by participants.

An analysis connecting Career Tech practices with participants' meanings of college success revealed that career services and knowledgeable and helpful instructors impacted all six meanings while admissions impacted four. Of those practices not directly cited by participants, informational meetings seemed to have the greatest possible

influence on student success, followed by the cohort class structure and conveniently scheduled classes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an introduction of the study site, Career Tech, in order to establish a context in which to describe and analyze its practices and their possible relationship to participant success in college. The description and analysis resulted from addressing the two remaining research questions for this study.

The first question addressed was, “What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of moderately to highly proprietary school students?” This led to the identification of practices in the areas of student services, instruction, and information that were more greatly experienced by participants and ones that participants felt were most relevant to them as students. Analysis revealed that practices to which participants were more frequently and intensely exposed were also the ones they considered to be most relevant. These practices were: (a) career services, (b) admissions, and (c) knowledgeable and helpful instructors.

The third and final question addressed was, “How do these practices work to impact the success of moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students?” The same practices that were considered to be most relevant by participants were also credited by them with impacting their college success. They were also found to have the common facilitative elements of providing encouragement, information, and convenience. Other practices, although not directly credited by participants with impacting their college success, contained all or some of the facilitative elements of the other three, and based on participant feedback, were possible contributing factors in their success. They included monthly informational meetings, being part of a cohort class structure, and conveniently schedule classes.

The foundation upon which these two questions were built was the first research question, What meanings do moderately to highly nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term “college success?” It was therefore important to tie the data analysis back to this question. Identified contributory practices were assigned to each of the six meanings of success which emerged from participant profiles from Chapter 4 to show how they may have addressed that meaning. Based on this analysis, the most

contributory practices were career services, knowledgeable and helpful instructors, admissions, and informational meetings.

CHAPTER 6: EMERGING INSIGHTS

This interpretive study examined the relationship between institutional practices of postsecondary proprietary schools and the college success of moderately to highly nontraditional students. By giving voice to nontraditional students, the study provided direct insight into what college success meant to them. Within that context, the study was able to show, through description of their experiences, how participants connected proprietary school practices with their college success.

This chapter explores insights that emerged from description and analysis of the data. I hope that the following exploration of these insights will encourage readers to ponder them as I continue to do, particularly in light of the reasons this research was undertaken: (a) the large and growing at-risk population of nontraditional students in higher education; (b) the growth of proprietary schools and their documented success with student outcomes; and (c) the possibility that some proprietary school practices may be applicable to addressing the increasing accountability expectations facing community colleges. Each insight is introduced individually, a process which includes grounding it in current research. Implications for practice and future research are then addressed.

Student Characteristics and NCES Criteria

Exploring the characteristics of nontraditional students may lead to a more in-depth understanding of how NCES nontraditional criteria actually affect college success. As described in Chapter 4, six characteristics emerged from the analysis of participant interviews to describe who the participants were as nontraditional college students. In relating these characteristics back to the NCES criteria which were used to select the participants, I began to think about the NCES criteria not simply as conditions for being nontraditional, but rather as being contributory to the characteristics shared by the participants. This relationship is illustrated in Table 19.

Table 19

Relationship Between NCES Criteria and Participants' Nontraditional Characteristics

NCES nontraditional criterion	Participants' nontraditional characteristic
Delayed entry	Need to support family
	Need for practical training
	Desire for personal growth
	Self doubt
	Multiple responsibilities
Had Dependents	Need to support family
	Need for practical training
	Multiple responsibilities
	Family support
Financially independent	Need to support family
	Need for practical training
	Multiple responsibilities
Single parent	Need to support family
	Need for practical training
	Desire for personal growth
	Multiple responsibilities
	Family support
No HS Diploma	Need for practical training
	Desire for personal growth
	Self doubt
Worked full time	Need for practical training
	Multiple responsibilities
Attended part time	Not represented by participants

The NCES trait of delayed entry can be used to exemplify this relationship. Horn, Cataldi, and Sikora (2005) found that delayed-entry students are older and most likely will have acquired family and work responsibilities before going to college. They are also more likely to be single parents. It is easy to see how persons in these circumstances

could have characteristics similar to those of the participants. As shown above, delayed-entry students likely face multiple responsibilities, including the need to support a family, a necessity which could be most quickly addressed through practical training. Kasworm (2008) further suggested that older students have both the “courage and the fragility” (p. 27) to seek personal growth and to experience self doubt in the process. Similarly, Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) wrote of the “interrole conflict” between the multiple responsibilities of work, family, and school (p. 247), which points to the NCES characteristics of financial independence, single parenthood, having dependents, delayed entry, and being employed full time.

While little research outside of that conducted by NCES has been predicated on NCES criteria, the literature does consider many of the characteristics emerging from this study’s profile analysis as criteria for being nontraditional, the most common being multiple responsibilities (Giancola et al., 2009; Hughes, 1992; Kasworm, 2008). The need for practical training was another heavily supported characteristic, attributed to students’ time and financial constraints (Pusser et al., 2007), need for training relevant to career goals (Belcastro & Purslow, 2006), and lack of traditional academic skills (Hughes). As shown in Table 19, the need for practical training can be linked to each of the NCES criterion.

NCES criteria have been linked quantitatively to the college success of nontraditional students. Yet while they may produce statistics, they do not tell the story of the student experience. A set of characteristics describing who these students are, inclusive of their needs and influences, may help determine how NCES criteria actually impact student success. For example, more could be learned about what college means to GED recipients and how having a GED impacts their actions regarding college by asking them. Similarly, linking characteristics back to NCES criteria that have been statistically proven to affect student attrition could either lend credence to researchers’ categorizations of their subjects or participants as nontraditional or prompt them to rethink those categorizations. For instance, does age, the most often used criterion for nontraditionalism, truly impact a student’s risk of attrition? Or, are there circumstances surrounding age, such as delayed entry, which create the risk?

Further, while the literature and NCES criteria have defined nontraditional students primarily based on their risks, the data emerging from this study revealed that nontraditional characteristics may also be beneficial. For example, participants spoke of how having family support—a characteristic which could emerge from the NCES criteria of having dependents or being a single parent—played a positive role for them as college students. The characteristic of having multiple responsibilities, which could incorporate several NCES criteria, seemed to equip participants with the organizational skills necessary to manage their busy schedules. For instance, Violet was a consummate calendar keeper, while Susan planned study time around lunch breaks. While participants may have lacked the social or cultural capital to fully navigate the internal college structure without assistance, these characteristics point to strengths that may have impacted their college success. Perhaps other characteristics have yet to be discovered or interpreted in a way that acknowledges the positive role they may play. Such discoveries could possibly lead to a new discussion regarding nontraditional characteristics' contribution to college success.

As indicated in the literature review, researchers have for decades lamented the lack of a consistent definition of nontraditional students, which has made it difficult to study and understand them. Perhaps through the interaction of measurable criteria and the characteristics which may emerge from asking nontraditional students about them—including how they came about, their impact, and how they are dealt with—this picture could develop.

Student Characteristics' Potential to Inform College Practices

Nontraditional student characteristics, through informing how students construct meanings of college success, may also inform college practices to facilitate that success.

Six meanings of college success emerged from the data collected through participant interviews. An analysis of these meanings led me to believe that participants' nontraditional characteristics were linked to their creation (see Table 12). This supposition fits within the hermeneutic phenomenological concept of historicity, in which the events of the past evolve to form present day meanings, and is supported by current literature. As Kasworm (2008) suggested, students use their complex lives, or

“who they are,” to create a student identity and work toward “who they wish to become” (p. 33).

The analysis also suggested that the nontraditional student characteristics could be considered either encouraging or challenging motivators in how participants made meaning of college success. The need to support family, for example, was an encouragement for participants to work toward getting a better job, graduation/certification, gaining and applying knowledge, and not giving up. In most cases, this need was predicated on a history of participants not being able to provide for their children as they would have liked. Similarly, participants realized their need for practical training through having experienced a lack of success or enjoyment from previous academic-based instruction in high school and/or college. Even the two challenging characteristics of multiple responsibilities and self doubt, which had to be overcome in order to achieve success, played a role in how participants created their meanings of college success. For example, participants spoke proudly of how they overcame their self doubt in order to do what was expected of them at school and to face down thoughts of giving up. This self doubt manifested itself through life events such as previous loss of jobs and delayed entry into college. Giancola et al. (2009) explained that overcoming such challenges results from an adaptive coping behavior that is part of the positive cognitive appraisal process in which a perceived threat instead becomes a challenge to overcome. In fact, by overcoming their self doubt, some participants were able to assume new characteristics that further encouraged them to pursue their education. Christmas, for example, took on the role of class leader; Juanita came to see herself as a role model for other single parents. Such transformation speaks to a sense of hopefulness that students can experience by resolving barriers in pursuing their education (Chao & Good, 2004).

This study suggests that nontraditional student characteristics represent not only “what is,” but “what can be” when they arrive on campus. As a manifestation of students’ lived experiences—both before and during their college—they help students create meanings, hence directing their actions as college students. If students are the ones deciding whether to remain in school and that decision is based at least in part on whether they deem themselves to be successful (Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985), it is

possible that knowing more about the characteristics that contribute to students' construct of college success may inform practices aimed at facilitating their success. This involves recognizing students' past experiences as well as emerging characteristics that may be formed through practices they experience as students.

The Personal Meanings of College Success

In addition to practical, pre-established outcomes, college success meanings can incorporate goals that are both personal and fluid in nature. As noted in the preceding section and in Chapter 4, six meanings of college success emerged from the profiles of study participants. Based on the literature, the practical meanings of getting a better job, graduation/ certification, and applying knowledge and skills were not unexpected. Research confirms that most nontraditional students enter college with career-focused goals (Aslanian, 2001; Bauman et al., 2004; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chao & Good, 2004), to which each of the practical meanings relates. The literature also provided some support for the personal meanings of not giving up, being able to do what is expected, and transforming their lives. In fact, in their study of the role of social support of female college students, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) confirmed that personal or "intrinsic" goals can be just as or more important to students than the "extrinsic" ones of job and career (p. 149).

Unlike the practical meanings with which participants entered Career Tech, the personal ones seemed to evolve as participants progressed through the medical assisting program. This corresponds with what Chao and Good (2004) described as the "self-rewarding nature of college" (p. 8), in which successive achievements can cause students to start envisioning themselves as a success. As in their study, participants spoke enthusiastically of how accomplishing good grades and earning awards made them feel as though they were and would continue to be successful.

Of the personal meanings, the concept of transforming their lives was most mentioned by participants. This goal is usually attributed to a life event such as a divorce or change in job status (Aslanian, 2001; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Kasworm, 2008). Participants described how job loss, single parenthood, and being unsuccessful at previous college attempts affected their meanings of success. Becoming a role model for their children was the way in which most saw that transformation manifesting itself, a

goal that Bauman et al. (2004) also identified in their study on nontraditional student counseling needs.

The meaning participants spoke most proudly about represented something they had not done—give up. This may be because giving up was a very familiar concept to them. Broken marriages, dropping out of high school, and job loss were all experienced by participants, and two had previously given up on college. For them, going to college represented a deliberate decision to break out of the cycle. Yet, they were fearful of this unknown territory, and most were doubtful that they would be able to remain in college. While some considered dropping out, all of them experienced an increased comfort level as they progressed through the medical assisting program. This process is validated by the second of Kasworm's (2008) four "acts of hope" for adult college students (p. 28), which is that they will remain in college through the process of adapting to or renegotiating their place as college students.

Just as participants initially believed that giving up could be a possible outcome of their college experience, they were also uncertain of their ability to do what was expected of them in college. Many did not feel like they fit the mold of "college student" and were intimidated by the expectations of academia. For some, time constraints and childcare needs presented challenges. As with not giving up, being able to do what was expected meant conquering their self doubt, a notion supported by Rendon (1995) who found that among the most important indicators of Latino student success was the belief in one's ability to perform in college and capacity to learn.

While the concept of transforming one's life is widely recognized by researchers, the meanings of not giving up and doing what is expected are not commonly found in the literature. This may be because these meanings emerge as students progress through college and therefore are not captured upon college entry as reasons for attending college. Also, these goals may seem small compared to traditionally considered outputs such as graduation. However, practical meanings can be influenced by personal ones. Graduation is, after all, a result of not giving up and being able to do what is expected in class, suggesting that an understanding of students' personal success meanings might inform practices that could impact both personal and practical student outcomes.

The Integration of College Practices

The student services and information practices considered most relevant to participants were highly integrated into the college routine. Participants were asked which student services and information practices they had most frequently used or been exposed to and which were most relevant to them as college students. For all practices cited, relevancy corresponded with intensity of use. Participants had the greatest interaction with career services. That contact occurred primarily through a mandatory career development course which required students to complete assignments such as the development of resumes and participation in mock interviews. Contact with the Career Services Office was otherwise minimal, although participants seemed to have a strong awareness of its offerings and what to expect in job search support upon finishing their externships. Participants cited time and transportation conflicts and not being ready for the services as reasons for minimal usage outside of the classroom, but expressed that the early classroom intervention would benefit them in their externships and job searches and had motivated them in their other classes.

As the literature explains, the primary mission of proprietary schools is career development (Bailey et al., 2001; Kinser, 2006b; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). By incorporating career services into the classroom curriculum, Career Tech was doing what Kinser described as a primary job of student services, “to clear the distractions and provide the focus necessary so that students keep their eyes on the learning prize” (p. 276). As described above, having career services in the classroom forced participants to focus on the skills needed to both obtain and maintain employment. Left to their own devices, participants were less likely to initiate use of the services.

The second most relevant student service was admissions. Like career services, use of this service was to a great degree compulsory. As potential students, all of the participants met with an admissions representative, also known as a recruiter. By informing them about the campus, the medical assisting program, and the career potential that training could afford them, recruiters helped participants form expectations, a process which can make the transition to the college environment less intimidating (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Upon admission, participants’ recruiters became their college representative, staying in close contact and serving as their go-to

person on campus. It is common for proprietary school students to be assigned a primary contact who keeps in frequent communication throughout their enrollment (Bailey et al., 2001; Kinser, 2006b; Rosenbaum et al., 2006), with job evaluations tied to student completion rates as they were at Career Tech (Kinser).

Of all informational practices initiated by college, the mandatory monthly meeting, or awards ceremony as participants referred to it, assured that students actually received the intended messages. The meeting was cited as the most relevant informational practice by participants despite its absence from the list of practices provided to them. Expectations and encouragement seem to be the prevailing themes that drove participant appreciation of this activity, which was led by their instructors between classes and attended by other college representatives as necessary. The meeting compares with the group advising meetings practiced in the occupational colleges studied by Rosenbaum et al. (2006), designed to assure that students receive essential information and to generate positive peer pressure.

By integrating these practices into the college routine, Career Tech mandated their use. It is a common practice for proprietary schools to integrate student services with the academic mission of the college (Bailey et al., 2001; Kinser, 2006b; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Kinser specifically noted that student services staff are welcomed into the classroom and are included in academic decisions, a practice that appears to have taken place at Career Tech. Career Services sponsored a portion of the college's academic offerings, while admissions staff checked on student progress, sometimes coming to class to do so. Student services staff were involved in monthly student meetings as the need for information was required. They appeared to be, as Kinser observed in his study, "an advocate and key facilitator of student learning" (p. 275).

Initiating and integrating the use of student services is a common strategy in proprietary schools and one that researchers say is necessary to ensure the success of all nontraditional students, regardless of the institution type. Various researchers (Grubb, 2006; Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Rendon, 1993; Rosenbaum et al., 2006) have concurred that many nontraditional students lack the ability to acquire and use information effectively, which can have a detrimental effect on achievement outcomes such as degree attainment. By bringing services to the student, Career Tech is doing

what Rosenbaum et al. described as shifting the responsibility of student success away from the student to the institution, thereby lessening students' need for social know-how. This shift occurs, the authors suggested, through the streamlining of processes and the facilitation of information gathering. Study participants indicated that going to college was *a* process, rather than a series of separate processes of which they had to keep track.

In designing this research, it seemed important to ask participants how frequently they used student services as a starting point to understanding their relevancy. However, my point of reference was traditional education, in which student services are offered cafeteria style and students pick and choose what they need. If, however, students do not have the social capital to know what they need, frequency of use may not be tied to relevancy. Participants described Career Tech as a college which, through the integration and hence initiation of services, empowers its students by keeping them fully informed and recognizing them for meeting communicated expectations. As Juanita said, "...there's no surprises." Upon entering college, nontraditional students have already encountered their share of surprises, many of which have had life-changing consequences. Eradicating them in college may also rid students of unnecessary stress in their already complicated lives.

The Need for Explicitness in Instruction

Having a knowledgeable instructor who applied explicit teaching methods was important to participants. When participants were asked to discuss the importance of instructional practices, the instructor immediately became the focus of the conversation. They expressed a need for instructors to know the subject, be able to prove its relevance, and teach it in a way that suits their learning style. Further, they indicated that the instructor should be clear about expectations and provide help when needed. In short, learning should be facilitated by a knowledgeable instructor who is open and accommodating.

Participants saw knowledge as a cohesive quality that impacted instructors' ability in each of the areas mentioned above. They often spoke of the knowledge of their Career Tech instructors in respect to the practical experience they brought to the classroom. This first-hand knowledge allowed participants to understand both the relevance of what they were learning in the classroom and how they could transfer that knowledge to the world of work. Relevance is one of three components in Belcastro and Purslow's (2006)

institutional framework for promoting nontraditional student success while Compton et al. (2006) cited it as one of five conditions for student success.

In addressing the need to be taught based on their learning style, all participants indicated a need for hands-on instruction, a common reason students choose proprietary schools (Kelly, 2001). Expressing a lack of or discomfort with academic learning skills, most participants indicated that they did not consider themselves to be capable of traditional college work. The need for hands-on instruction is acknowledged by cognitive learning theories that shift the focus from being teacher-centered to being learner centered. Bandura's social theory suggests that students, empowered by their teacher, can strengthen their self-efficacy by successfully learning and mastering experiences. Bredo's constructivist theory states that knowledge can only be constructed if the student interacts within the real-life contextual setting (Prickel, 1999). The application of both theories was frequently experienced by participants. This may help explain why, despite initially doubting their learning abilities, all participants indicated that they would like to continue their education beyond Career Tech.

Participants indicated a strong need to know what was expected of them and most felt that need was accommodated by Career Tech instructors. This allowed them to come to class prepared and to feel more connected to the learning experience. They were able to complete assignments and study around other responsibilities such as work and children. Schunk (2000) wrote that expectations are important because they help people form cognitive maps, or internal plans which direct actions that are needed to attain goals. More (as cited in Ross, Stokes, & Stiles, 1984) submitted that adult learners have a lower tolerance for ambiguity; therefore having clear expectations may be more important to nontraditional students. Participants indicated that their instructors were accommodating to their needs, and through actions such as encouraging questions and being available to students after class, showed concern that students were learning. The need for accommodation was validated by Valadez' (1993) study on cultural capital requirements of community college students in developmental classes. He found that it was important to students that faculty saw them as individuals, rather than merely as a product of the classroom, and that they spent time with them.

While the literature is replete with research about nontraditional students' limited knowledge of educational process, my conversations with participants about instructional practices revealed that they seemed to understand what they were bringing to and needed from the process. They knew why they had come to college, what their expectations were, and what their limitations were. They expressed a strong desire to learn and held their instructors accountable for addressing their learning needs in a way that helped them overcome any deficits they brought to class. They needed to feel that they had invested their time and money wisely to gain relevant, applicable training and to know that they would be able to meet expectations in order to make the most of that training. For them, explicitness seems to have played a role in addressing their needs and helping them meet expectations.

Creating Relationships Through Ongoing Practices

Participants were more likely to credit ongoing practices, rather than transactional ones, for their success, suggesting that relationships were important to them. The Career Tech practices that participants credited with their college success were ongoing for all or a substantial portion of participants' enrollments. Unlike transactional processes such as financial aid, they supplied a continuous flow of information, encouragement, and convenience.

Researchers have suggested that developing an identity as a successful college student is a complex process for nontraditional students who must first add college to their already busy lives and then adapt to an environment that is foreign to them (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Kasworm, 2008; Rendon, 1993). This may help explain why having services and practices accompany them through various stages of their enrollment was important to participants. Kasworm's (2008) first act of hope for adult students is the purposeful decision to become a college student. Each participant spoke proudly about having made this decision, with some even connecting it to their success meaning of not giving up. As Julie stated, "I'm finally here doing it and I'm going to be here every day." Kasworm wrote that this decision requires not only courage, but support, which participants indicated their admissions representatives had provided by making them feel like they belonged and could be successful at Career Tech.

Such validation continued throughout their enrollment and came not only from admissions, but from career services, their instructors, and the monthly information meetings. In the career development class, for example, participants not only learned the skills to search for a job and job expectations, but to see themselves as having something to offer their potential employers. In the monthly meetings, students received recognition as a result of their grades. As Rendon (1993) wrote, “When validation is present, students experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they and everything that they bring to the college experience is accepted and recognized as valuable” (p. 16).

Participants spoke vividly about how having knowledgeable and helpful instructors had impacted their success. Similarly, Valadez (1993) found that students who had positive educational experiences associated their success with the relationships they had with their instructors. In keeping with Kasworm’s (2008) second act of hope for adult students, the author suggested that the most powerful influence on engagement in college is the classroom, where learning successes and relationships with their instructors can validate individuals’ worth and value as college students. Rendon (1993) outlined specific actions of instructors that fostered academic validation among her participants, some of which were pointed out by participants in my study. These included being personable and approachable toward students, structuring learning experiences that allowed students to feel capable of learning, and working individually with students who needed extra help. Participants said experiencing these actions made them believe that they could do what was expected of them and that what they were doing in class was worthwhile.

The above-mentioned practices contribute to what Kasworm (2008) referred to as “the complex interactive environment of the collegiate world” (p. 33) which students use to determine their identity as college students. They also speak to nontraditional students’ need for a “continuum of services” as opposed to the traditional “information dump” prevalent in community colleges (Grubb, 2006, p. 213). To these ends, Belcastro and Purslow (2006) named relationships as the second component in their integrated framework promoting student success. They wrote that “relationships comprise a main pillar in the framework around which everything revolves” (p. 6).

During my tenure in higher education, I have heard students referred to as products, as if they were being controlled, and as customers and clients, suggestive of a more service-oriented approach to meeting their needs. However, this insight suggests that what students seek from their colleges cannot be so neatly categorized. Students seek acknowledgement, guidance, support, and validation, which may not be offered through transactional processes and may require established relationships.

The Changing Influence of College Practices

Practices that draw students to a college may not be seen by students as influencing their college success. Prior to the conversations regarding Career Tech practices impacting their success, participants were asked about the reasons they chose Career Tech. Among the most common ones given were: (a) convenience, both in terms of class scheduling and campus location; (b) the campus environment; (c) financial aid; and (d) short-term training. Yet, these considerations for enrollment were generally not credited by participants as being factors in their college success. For example, while all participants made it clear that they would not be attending college without financial aid, only one credited it with impacting her college success. Most, in fact, had little recall of the process of applying for aid. Also, while most indicated that the facility's physical environment gave them a good impression of Career Tech and was seen as relevant to them, it was not identified as impacting their success.

Belcastro and Purslow's (2006) integrated framework for nontraditional student success may help explain why having particular needs met may not be seen by students as being contributory to their success. The authors posited that nontraditional students begin their college careers with foundational, or basic, needs that they consider in making the decision to attend college. Foundational needs exist in areas such as financial aid, scheduling options, safety, convenience, flexible and available services, and location. Although these needs may be critical to student success, once they are met, students are free to turn their attention to the issues of personal growth and learning. This is where Belcastro and Purslow's relationship component becomes more important. As a conduit through which students can develop a sense of belonging and self-esteem, relationships allow students to envision themselves as college successes. As previously noted, the importance of this component was strongly reflected in this study. Participants credited

relationship-based practices such as attentive admissions representatives, encouraging career services staff, and knowledgeable and helpful instructors with their success.

The importance of this insight lies in the possible distinction between those factors that draw a student to an institution and those that sustain them through completion. As noted above, these factors may differ because as individuals evolve as students, so do their needs. Another possible reason for the distinction may be that what students are seeking from their college experience, although necessary for their success, may not be what ultimately makes them feel successful. If students who are made to feel successful are more likely to remain in school, understanding their changing needs could create an important link to establishing practices to increase student retention rates.

Summary of Insights

Seven insights have been offered for the consideration of those who are tasked with improving the success of nontraditional students. As a whole, they tell the story of a complex student population who sees college success through a kaleidoscope of previous experiences. As college students, they will continue to amass new experiences to add to the mosaic of their lives. For them, college is largely a personal journey. Along the way, they look to the college for connectivity and continuity through a relationship that will promote the change they need to take their lives in a whole new direction.

As suggested in the first insight, understanding why and how being nontraditional may affect success may facilitate a deeper exploration of a population so complex that researchers have yet to establish a common definition for it. As evidenced in the second and third insights, nontraditional students collect a variety of experiences throughout their lives which inform their identities as students and fuse to form their meanings of college success, both practical and personal.

Participants' need for connectivity and continuity is revealed through insights recapping their perceived relevance of college-initiated practices, the expectations they had of their instructors, and their tendency to credit ongoing practices with their college success. Finally, change is indicated in how participants began to actually see themselves as being successful and how the factors influencing their decision to attend Career Tech seemed less relevant to their success than those that touched them personally.

Through these insights this study reinforces the notion that nontraditional students come to college as a collection or product of the lives they have lived and that continue to evolve throughout the college experience. The study suggests that experiencing connectivity and continuity in college can effect the kind of change that students seek in order to take their lives in a new direction. As the nontraditional characteristics of the participants suggest, they face obstacles. Yet if students feel they can be overcome, these same obstacles can serve to motivate them to succeed. Career Tech helped participants in this study overcome their obstacles by proactively offering encouragement, information, and convenience.

Implications for Practice

Because the intent of this study was to identify proprietary school practices which may be applicable to community colleges, the following implications for practice are offered to those within the community college sector who are responsible for improving student outcomes. It is hoped that learning about nontraditional students' proprietary school experiences will inspire readers to think in new ways about raising the potential of nontraditional students and to consider the potential of proprietary school practices in informing that effort.

Nontraditional Students as Individuals

Nontraditional students have been largely characterized through statistics and labels, which say very little about them as individuals. The students themselves, however, have plenty to say about themselves. Through this study, characteristics emerged to provide descriptions as a conduit to understanding them. By seeing student characteristics as an amalgamation of influences and needs that affect how they make meaning of college success, decision makers might consider making the educational experience more personal and less institutional. For example, one response might be to restructure student services toward helping students overcome their self doubt by making it less intimidating to seek information and by providing outreach activities to make them feel welcome on campus. While addressing negative characteristics, decision makers might also consider identifying and cultivating positive nontraditional characteristics in order to increase their effect over student success. For example, campus events could be

held to recognize supportive family members. Leaders might further recognize that the life experiences and accompanying characteristics of nontraditional students may be an asset not only to the students who have experienced them, but to others as well. For instance, students who have successfully juggled multiple responsibilities or overcome self doubt could serve as mentors to other students facing these same issues.

Institutions generally perform academic preparedness assessments on incoming students and some survey them regarding their educational goals. This study suggests that there is much more that students are willing to share that may be beneficial to helping their college help them. Participants in this study openly discussed not only why they decided to go to college, but also what their expectations of the college were, inclusive of their own doubts and fears. Further, they acknowledged their limitations and how the college could help them overcome them. The many and varied experiences of nontraditional students have likely made them take stock of themselves, allowing them to be articulate about them if asked. For example, students can inform decision-makers by being placed on committees and initiatives related to student retention. Orientations, which are generally structured toward telling students what is expected of them, could also ask students what they expect of the educational experience, what excites them or scares them about the process, how they plan on navigating through it, and how the college can help. Studies such as this one can assist in asking the right questions.

Personal Meanings of College Success

College represents a highly personal journey for nontraditional students. This was particularly evident in the meanings of college success shared by participants in this study. Half of these meanings were personal in nature. They were as grandiose as wanting to transform their lives and as deceptively simple as wanting to do what is expected and to not give up. Yet, these latter two goals are not far off the mark in terms of how educators define student success. Student retention and completion, in essence, equate to students doing what is expected and not giving up. Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Long, and Bradley (1999) concluded their study on adult college student success by asking whether college success should be seen through definitions owned and internalized by students or through ones imposed by institutions and faculty. Given the reporting requirements imposed on institutions of higher education, perhaps decision

makers want to consider asking questions that relate to whether meeting students' goals, both practical and personal, could impact institutional measures of success.

Importance of Relationships

Because college is a personal experience, nontraditional students seek relationships to help them navigate that experience. When participants discussed the Career Tech practices which they credited for their success, they spoke of a staff who cared about them, recalled words of encouragement spoken specifically to them, and commented on how their general outlook on life had improved. This did not happen through transactional or chance occurrences. It happened through the course of being in an ongoing relationship, in particular with career services and admissions personnel and with their instructors. The relationships provided connectivity by recognizing students as individuals who belonged on campus and could succeed. The continuity of information, encouragement, and convenience resulting from these ongoing relationships gave students a sense of security and confidence.

Belcastro and Purslow (2006) suggested that every institution should ask itself three questions, to be answered from the perspective of nontraditional students. One of them is, "What relationships will support my goals" (p. 10)? The answer may help colleges develop resources in areas in which relationships most benefit students. For example, as Grubb (2006) pointed out, most community colleges have a single person handling career services for their students although career development is a major reason cited for going to college, particularly among nontraditional students. Decision makers may also want to consider leveraging existing resources to establish a closer connection with students over a period of time. For example, electronic communications could be used to maintain close communication with students to both inform and motivate them. Also, resource information could be shared in the classroom, the central point of contact for students, as appropriate to the subject being taught.

Benefits of Integrated Practices

Having practices integrated with their overall college routine compels students to access services that they otherwise may not seek out. The use of each practice cited by study participants as impacting their success was initiated by Career Tech, which had

incorporated them into the college routine. Further, participants rarely sought them out on their own. This was particularly evident in their experiences with career services. While participants found their in-class exposure to this service to be invaluable, their use of the service outside of class was minimal. Similarly, the distribution of information through mandatory monthly meetings had a great impact on participants, while other attempts at disseminating information made little impression on them. Further, participants appreciated the assertive and continuous nature of their relationship with their recruiters.

Rosenbaum et al. (2006) concluded that occupational colleges have analyzed their organizational information requirements and devised systematic procedures to provide access to that information while community colleges put the burden of acquiring information on students, making use of services unequal (Grubb, 2006; Karp et al., 2008; Rosenbaum et al.). As Kaitlyn mentioned, while community college services have to be sought out, Career Tech staff made sure that students knew that they were there to help them. Participants' experiences indicate that community college decision makers may want to consider developing outreach strategies to promote services as being relevant to students and making them easier to access, including possibly incorporating them into instructional areas. Further, their experiences suggest the need for limiting information to that which is relevant and presenting it in a manner understandable to students.

The Need for Explicitness

Nontraditional students want to be given information in an explicit manner, as reflected in participants' success meaning of being able to meet expectations. Participants came to Career Tech with this need as recruits. Having an informative recruiter explain what to expect as students made the decision to enroll easier, even though some of the college's expectations seemed overwhelming to them at the time. As students, having an instructor who could be explicit in explaining and demonstrating expectations, both in the classroom and the workplace, was also important to them. As Juanita explained, "... I don't wanna be messing up. I wanna go ahead and do it right the first time." Meanwhile, participants credited monthly meetings with keeping them abreast of out-of-class responsibilities such as setting up their externships.

Participants indicated that receiving explicit information allowed them to make the most of their education, in which they had invested much time and money, neither of which would likely be available for future attempts. For community college decision makers, the implication is to make students' educational experiences as free of surprises as possible. Surprises lead to poor decisions, which result in the loss of time and money. Strategies might include curtailing the number of information outlets, perhaps through implementation of the one-stop shop strategy, thereby lessening the chances for conflicting information to be disseminated.

The Ever-Changing Horizons of Students

Students continue to change as they progress through college, incorporating the present with the past. As in the case of participants in this study, the reasons they had for choosing a college seemed to be mentally dismissed as new experiences reframed what was important to them. Also, how they made meaning of college success seemed to change as they began to experience it. For example, the longer they did not give up, the more important that meaning of success became to them. The implication here is to acknowledge the evolution of students and their needs. A student who enters college with an accommodating schedule, financial aid, and on-campus childcare, for example, may later need career advice, personal counseling, or simply some words of encouragement to stay in school. Community college leaders, therefore, might consider looking at their traditional structures and practices from the standpoint of what student needs they are meeting and for what stages in the student's college career they are designed.

Summary

In summary, the implications for practice raise the following questions for readers, particularly those community college leaders charged with improving nontraditional student outcomes, to consider:

1. Might seeing nontraditional students for who they are inform practices to make them successful?
2. Could addressing nontraditional students' personal meanings of success positively impact institutional meanings of success as well?

3. How important are institutional relationships in helping nontraditional students navigate the college experience?
4. Would the integration of services help assure that nontraditional students will use them?
5. How could providing explicit information to nontraditional students help them get the most from their education?
6. Should the evolving nature of nontraditional students and their needs be considered in the development of practices designed to promote student success?

Implications for Future Study

This study focused on a small group of nontraditional students—females seeking certificates and possessing two or more nontraditional characteristics—and on the practices at one proprietary school study site. Despite its limited scope, the study contributes to the knowledge of two elements of higher education that merit a greater understanding. The depth of the data resulting from this study can be used to inform future research that can contribute to that understanding.

Nontraditional Students

While researchers have suggested that student characteristics should be taken into account in development of practices to ensure success (Kuh, Kinsey, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007b), research on what success means to students is scant, and I found no studies on how students actually arrive at their meanings of success. Future research could possibly identify characteristics impacting how various nontraditional groups across the educational sectors view college success. For example, are there characteristics which are more likely to be inherent in male students, or perhaps in highly nontraditional students? How do these characteristics manifest themselves in the creation of college success meanings? Among the educational sectors, community colleges in particular should consider studying their students—both technical and transfer—since they enroll the vast majority of nontraditional students in higher education.

Alfred wrote that “colleges and universities should know more about their students than external agencies do” (p. 71). One way to do this is by discovering more about what motivates students to persist or drop out. Themes resultant from interpretive

studies such as this one can be used to develop quantitative surveys which can be administered at key points in students' college careers. This could help researchers determine whether the college experience changes how students view success and help elucidate whether and how that experience hinders or promotes their success.

This study suggests that many of the nontraditional student characteristics used by researchers can be tied to NCES criteria. Interpretive researchers might consider formally linking their characterizations to these criteria in order to both illuminate them and to allow a unified body of literature to emerge upon which future studies can be built. Researchers are also asked to consider the positive as well as negative roles that nontraditional characteristics may play in achieving college success.

Practices

Although it focused on practices in proprietary schools, this study poses implications for future study both in this and in other sectors of higher education, particularly community colleges.

In Proprietary Schools

This study examined the intensity of use and relevancy that six participants placed on practices at one proprietary school. Additional interpretive and quantitative research could further examine what proprietary school practices exist across the sector, their frequency of use, and perceived relevance. Case studies of proprietary school practices might also reveal which nontraditional student characteristics and tendencies are considered in the development and delivery of these practices. This study also suggested that the reasons students make use of proprietary school practices include their integration with academics, the aggressiveness with which the schools promote them, and their mandatory nature. Researchers should continue to examine the extent to which these strategies are employed throughout the proprietary sector and to what extent they may promote student use. Research identifying additional practices affecting student success is also warranted.

Little is known about what students experience in the proprietary school classroom (Kinser, 2006a). Participants in this study spoke to practices relevant to what was important to them, but more could be learned about student experiences through ethnographies or case studies that would provide more in-depth analysis and description

of instructional practices. Much has been written about the operational side of proprietary school instruction, contrasting such features as flexible class scheduling and entry and exit options with traditional higher education's lack of them (Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006a; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Studies could also be undertaken to compare the schools' instructional practices with the traditional sector, specifically community colleges, which share very similar student populations. One of the common assertions about proprietary schools is that they train rather than educate students (Bailey et al., 2001) and that while training focuses on skills alone, an education leads to individual development (Ruch, 2001). Research could address this contention. If differences exist in how proprietary schools and community colleges train or educate their students, research might also address the question, Which strategy most benefits nontraditional students who come to college to prepare for a career?

Throughout Higher Education

This study did not set out to explore relationships. However, by discovering their potential importance, it suggests that future studies could further investigate the aspects of relationship that may exist in practices throughout all sectors of higher education. Such investigation lends itself to ethnographic research in which researchers would spend an extended period of time in the field understanding how relationships emerge and develop through venues such as advising, tutoring, mentoring, and class cohorts. An examination of how relationships may meet basic, personal, or instructional needs and the impact that they may have on specific groups of students from within both traditional and nontraditional student populations is also indicated.

While much literature exists on nontraditional student needs such as convenience and practical training, further research on their needs is merited. For example, how might the need for relevancy in the information being taught manifest itself in other aspects of the educational experience? For example, in an educational setting where student services are not integrated, as with most community colleges, what would make these services seem relevant to students and what would encourage students to use them? More can also be learned about students' expectations of the college experience, in part to help colleges to work toward meeting those expectations when warranted, but also to

provide a context in which incoming students can be educated about the college experience.

Finally, CCRC researchers determined that community colleges with similar student populations and offerings report varying student success outcomes (Bailey et al., 2005). Learning more about effective college practices, particularly in regards to how their processes take students' meanings of success into account, could reveal additional practices that could inform community college leaders.

Summary

While this study provided depth, the implications it offers for future study are indeed broad, covering nontraditional students, proprietary schools, and community colleges. Little is known about nontraditional students' meanings of success or the operation of proprietary schools. Given the size of the nontraditional student population and proprietary schools' demonstrated success with their students, these two elements of higher education deserve further understanding. They merit continued investigation as community colleges implement innovative strategies toward improving student outcomes. The opportunity exists for both interpretive and positivist research in both of these areas. Given the personal nature of the college experience, as expressed through students' meanings of success and their college experiences, positivist researchers may consider informing their research through interpretive data.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter have been provided the insights that I, as an instrument of the research process, saw emerge from the data I collected from the six participants in this study. The insights revolve around participant characteristics, meanings of success, and the proprietary school practices they credited with their success. What unfolded for me was the story of a group of complex individuals who came to Career Tech with histories of disappointment and a need and determination to transform their lives. Therefore, college to them represented a personal journey and as such, demanded that they form relationships to manage that journey. In Career Tech, I saw an institution that seemed to accept these students and took a large role in assuring their success, primarily through the integration of practices and the relationships that resulted.

These insights represent my interpretations of the data resulting from the description and analysis provided in Chapters 4 and 5. Every attempt was made to provide rich data while preserving the context in which it was shared with me in order to honestly and openly represent what participants conveyed to me. I hope that readers, by calling on their own experiences, will see these insights as being both plausible and informative. I hope it will cause them to think about next steps that could result from these insights, whether in practice, research, or both.

CHAPTER 7: FINAL THOUGHTS

Through this study, I set out to learn how proprietary school practices might impact nontraditional student success. I believe that this study lends value to existing research, not only by exploring practices of a sector known for its inaccessibility, but by exploring what college success actually means to nontraditional students. The exploration of college success meant first understanding the participants as nontraditional students. I admit that this was the most enjoyable part of this research and will stay with me at least throughout the duration of my career in higher education. I came to understand that even though Career Tech facilitated their success, it was their hard work and determination—often against terrific odds—that ultimately resulted in their college success.

As a student advisor, I often find myself recalling conversations I shared with participants as I speak with the students sitting before me. I think of how Juanita dismissed the “little birdie” who told her that she would never amount to anything and Julie’s declaration that after waiting so long to start school, “I’m not missing one minute.” I recall Christmas’ large laugh and matter-of fact attitude and Kaitlyn’s dogged determination to get into nursing school. I remember how Violet’s rough exterior gave way to tears when she spoke of her college success. Finally, I remember Susan’s rationality and sense of humor and how they helped her make it through school.

Participants in this study had three personal meanings of college success—to do what was expected, to not give up, and to transform their lives. They had largely met two of these goals when I interviewed them, but having an education will forever continue to transform their lives. I wish for them all continued success—with their jobs, further education, and their families—and the happiness that this success can provide.

The exploration of proprietary school practices took me on a journey that I would never have envisioned more than 20 years ago when I was beginning my community college career. Although conducting a literature review gave me new insights on this sector of higher education, I still had reservations about whether I would actually enjoy the research process, particularly in light of the sector’s lingering reputation for scandal and after I experienced difficulty securing a study cite. Career Tech officials, however, were accommodating to a researcher who they knew less about than I did about their

school. They, as well as their students, were forthcoming in providing the information I requested.

As interpretive research, this study focused on a small number of students at one proprietary school in order to provide depth, rather than breadth, in understanding about how they felt proprietary school practices impacted their success. My hope is, as van Manen (1990) put it, that this study causes the reader to share my curiosity about the phenomenon of proprietary school practices, grasping its nature and significance in a way not seen before. Rather than provide generalization, the goal of this study was to increase understanding, allowing readers to build upon their own prior and tacit knowledge. Hopefully, I have provided sufficient descriptive data, analysis, and interpretation to make similarity judgments possible as the reader determines its applicability.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

List of Documents Reviewed

Printed Materials from Career Tech

- 2009-10 catalog/student handbook
- Application and enrollment agreement
- Fall 2009 commencement ceremony program
- Orientation packet
- Promotional program-specific brochures
- Campus signage, fliers
- Wall of Fame (letters written to the college by former students)

Career Tech Electronic Media

- College website
- Financial Aid CD
- Enrollment information CD
- Promotional program-specific CD's

E-Mail Transmitted Attachments

- Sections of 2008 and 2009 Career Tech annual reports submitted to accrediting agency
- Excerpts from the Texas Workforce Commission Completion/Placement and Employment Data Report for 2007/2008

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

First Interview Purpose: (1) to identify goals that nontraditional students bring with them to college and the expectations they have of the college experience, and (2) to bring clarity to how students' life experiences and nontraditional traits have influenced these goals and expectations.

Context-Building Questions

- What made you decide to go to college?
- What was it about this college that made you select it?
- How did you find out about this college?
- What was it about this program that made you choose it?
- Why did you delay enrollment into college?
(Kaitlyn, who first attended college straight out of high school, was asked about disruptions in her college attendance)
- Do you consider yourself to be a nontraditional student, and if so, in what ways?

Research Question 1: What meaning do nontraditional proprietary school students ascribe to the term "college success?"

- What does college success mean to you?
- How do you think that your definition, or meaning, for college success was formed?
- How have you achieved college success thus far?
- What is left for you to do to be a fully successful college student?
- Do you feel that your meanings of college success are influenced by the fact that you are a nontraditional student? If so, in what ways?
- Do you feel your status as a nontraditional student has made it harder to be successful in college, and if so, how?
- Compare your expectations of college when you first began college and those you have today.
- Compare your expectations of yourself when you first began college and those you have today.

Second Interview Purpose: (1) to reveal what proprietary school practices are being used by nontraditional students and to what degree; (2) to determine which practices may be viewed as being more relevant than others, and why; (3) to obtain rich descriptions of student experiences with these practices; (4) to promote students' reflection of their educational experiences as a conduit to their success, thereby arriving at the essence of those experiences; and (5) to obtain lived experience accounts that can inform college leaders as to how proprietary school practices may impact nontraditional students.

Research Question 2: What proprietary school practices contribute to the success of nontraditional proprietary school students?

- You may recall from the form you completed when I visited your class that you indicated that you have used the following *student services*. (Read those from below that participant checked on questionnaire and confirm selections with participant.)
 - Financial Aid Office
 - Advising/Counseling
 - Admissions/Registrar's Office
 - Orientation
 - Career Services
 - Tutoring
 - Library
 - Met with Program Chair or President
 - Other: _____

Specifically, of the services that you have used, which ones do you use most frequently and why? Tell me about your experiences with these services.

- Please tell me about your experiences with the other services you have selected.
- Are there other student services you have used that do not appear on this list, and if so, please share your experiences with the service(s).
- Let's discuss the following *instructional* aspects of your education. First, which of these are most important to you and why? Rank them on your questionnaire from 1 to 5, with 1 being most important. Remember, this is what is important to you, not what you feel Career Tech does well.
 - That the information is taught in a way that suits my learning style
 - That the instructor is knowledgeable and helpful
 - That the class/lab feels comfortable to me
 - That the classes are scheduled conveniently for me
 - That I know what is expected of me
 - Other: _____
- Now, let's talk about these in relation to Career Tech. For each one, explain whether and how you have experienced it at Career Tech.
- Please indicate on your questionnaire whether you have received information from Career Tech from any of the following sources. How frequently do you receive *information* from the college these sources? Which do you feel are most effective means of communication and why?
 - Email
 - Mailings
 - Telephone

- Student Handbook
- College Catalog
- Others?

Research Question 3: How do proprietary school practices work to impact the success of nontraditional proprietary school students?

- Which, if any, *student services* at Career Tech have impacted your success as a college student? How?
- Which, if any, *instructional practices* at Career Tech have impacted your success as a college student? How?
- Which, if any, *information-sharing* practices at Career Tech have impacted your success as a college student? How?
- Reflecting back on your experiences overall as a college student, were you made to feel by the college that you would be successful? If so, how? Please share specific experiences.
- How has the success you have experienced in college impacted your life thus far?
- How do you think the success you've experienced in college will impact your future?
- Describe who you were when you began college, and describe who you are now. To what degree do you think the college has played a role in any change you have experienced?

APPENDIX C

Research Applicant Information Form

This form is being used in the selection of volunteers for the study, "Meeting the Needs of Nontraditional College Students? Student Perspectives on Proprietary School Practices." It will aid in selecting a group of volunteers who possess nontraditional student characteristics and who represent the diversity of the nontraditional student population.

IMPORTANT: The following information will be kept private and confidential. If you are not selected for inclusion in the study, this form will be destroyed upon final selection of all volunteers. Should you be selected for and agree by written consent to participate in the study, information provided by you on this form may be incorporated into the written research report. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of you and your institution.

General Information

First Name _____ Last Name _____
 Cell Phone _____ Home Phone _____
 Best Days/Times to Call _____ Email _____

Personal Information

Age 18-23 24-34 35-44 45-54 55+
 Gender Male Female
 Marital Status Married Single Divorced Widowed
 Ethnicity Caucasian African-American Hispanic Native American

Check all that apply to you:

Attend college part-time Work full-time
 Have dependents Single parent Financially Independent
 Delayed college enrollment (at least 1 year after high school)
 No high school diploma (earned a GED or did not finish high school)

I attend classes: During the day During the evening

If you work, list your job below. If not, write "unemployed."

Job _____ No. of Years _____

Education Prior to Attending This College

High School Graduate GED Recipient
 Did not graduate high school
 College # of College Hours Completed _____ OR Degree Earned _____

Program Information

Program You Are Enrolled In _____
 What program month are you currently in? _____

Student Services

Check any student services that you have used at this college.

Financial Aid Office Advising/Counseling
 Admissions/Registrar's Office Orientation
 Career Services Tutoring
 Library Other(s)
 Met with Program Chair or President

APPENDIX D

Services/Practices Questionnaire**1. STUDENT SERVICES**

You previously indicated that you have used the following services at the college, as checked below. Please confirm that these are the services you have used.

- Financial Aid Office
- Advising/Counseling
- Admissions Office
- Orientation
- Career Services
- Tutoring
- Library
- Met with Program Chair or President
- Other _____

2. INSTRUCTIONAL

Which of the following are most important to you and why? (1 being the most important)

- That the information is taught in a way that suits my learning style
- That the instructor is knowledgeable and helpful
- That the classroom/lab feels comfortable to me
- That the classes are scheduled conveniently for me
- That I know what is expected of me
- Other _____

3. INFORMATIONAL

Have you received information from the college from the following sources? (Write Y for yes and N for no)

- Email
- Mailings
- Telephone
- Student Handbook/College Catalog
- Other _____