AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Trenton A. Nettles for the degree of Master of Science in College Student Services Administration presented on April 30, 2015.

Title: The Experience of Master-Level Graduate Students with Prior Professional Experience Enrolled in Student Affairs Graduate Programs.

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This qualitative thesis explored the experiences of self-identified Master-level graduate students who worked four or more years in higher education before enrolling into a student affairs graduate program. The researcher utilized a sample of six semi-structured student interviews along with a review of relevant literature. The data analysis yielded five themes. The themes that emerged from the data played a role in determining how participants navigated the graduate school experience. The themes are: (a) motivation for returning to graduate school, (b) academia, (c) professional development opportunities, (d) relationships, and (e) cost associated with the program. This study contributes to the understanding of adult learners and their internal and external experience in graduate school. The author suggests ways in which student affairs graduate programs can adapt and improve support for the adult learner population and raises questions about the current curriculum and delivery of services to adult learners.

Keywords: graduate student, adult learners, student affairs

The Experience of Master-Level Graduate Students with Prior Professional
Experience Enrolled in Student Affairs Graduate Programs

by
Trenton A. Nettles

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Dean of the Graduate School

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

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Trenton A. Nettles, Author

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The Experience of Master-Level Graduate Students with Professional Experience in

Student Affairs Graduate Programs

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Personal Statement

A Non-Traditional graduate student is a student that has had four or more years working in higher education prior to attending graduate school to acquire their Masters degree. I entered graduate school with prior a working background in higher education, which made me a Non-Traditional student. As a Non-Traditional higher education graduate student, I had knowledge of and personal experience with non-traditional aged students. In my previous role at Howling University (HU), I was responsible for the non-traditional student department. This role helped me to expand my knowledge of resources and comprehend tribulations that this population faces everyday. At HU, Non-Traditional students account for about 13 percent of the student population. Concurrently, I began to notice differences at my graduate institution at Orangewood University (OU). The make up of the graduate program was very diverse in age, race, ethnicity, and gender. In addition, several members in the graduate program had prior experience working in higher education before returning to get their Masters degree. Combining my working experience with non-traditional students and my experience as a non-traditional graduate student, I began to ponder questions relating to resources provided, experience of traditional aged students vs. non-traditional experience, and the value placed on having prior working experience.

OU is a predominantly white institution that values research, teaching, and outreach while promoting economic, social, cultural and environment progress. It has resources dedicated to meeting the needs of specific populations; however, I found that this was not a common belief of all higher education student affairs Masters programs.

After talking with several colleagues and other graduate peers, I wondered what the common experience was for graduate students who had four or more years working in higher education prior to returning to get their Masters degree. This is how I initially came about my thesis research topic.

Topic of Study

There are many reasons why adult learners enroll into graduate school to pursue their Masters degree. Some return to gather the necessary credentials for job advancement, some return to take a break from the professional work setting, some go back to school to be intellectually stimulated, and some return to learn a new occupation (Stein, Wanstreet, and Trinko, 2011). Despite the many reasons why professionals return to graduate school, the experience and the credentials they earn can benefit their career in the long run. In this study, I explore the experiences of self-identified adult learners who are currently enrolled in the second year of their Student Affairs Higher Education Masters programs and who have worked professionally four or more years in higher education prior to returning to graduate school.

The primary focus of this study was to gain more knowledge about the experiences of graduate students while enrolled in their Masters degree program. Examining this phenomenon through a qualitative lens, the primary research questions are: a) what are the experiences of Master-level graduate students who enter a graduate school program with four or more years of professional experience?, b) what are the challenges associated with being in a Masters program for those having prior professional experience in the field of student affairs?, c) what are the strengths associated with being in a Masters program for those with four or more years of professional experience in the

field of student affairs?, and d) what supports need to be created to provide a welcoming/safe environment for returning Master-level graduate students?.

History of Higher Education

During the 17th century, several clergymen set out to America to establish the first American University. The American universities were set to model preexisting European colleges Oxford and Cambridge. The curriculum for the institutions was created to educate the clergy, inform children of their religious beliefs, and to defend the religious doctrine (Bauer, 2000). With that focus, the earliest colleges established were Harvard in 1636, William and Mary 1693, and Yale in 1701; all were religiously affiliated (Rudolph, 1990). At this time, college was only available to white males who came from privileged backgrounds. This model stayed in place until the late 18th century.

The Revolutionary war plagued colleges and universities as students and faculty were drafted to join the army. After the end of the war in 1782, more colleges began to emerge with their own curriculum and purpose. These institutions were also later influenced by the Morrill Land Grant Act (1862), which provided each state with 30,000 acres of federal land for each member in their congressional delegation (Library of Congress, 2014). This was a huge shift in higher education history. Prior to the Morrill Act, family members, locals, or clergyman donated land. The Morrill Act was just the beginning of the shift in higher education. In 1862, whites proposed admitting women and blacks into some institutions. With some success, the first woman's dorm was built in 1872 (Bauer, 2000). Next, came the introduction of extracurricular activities such as athletic teams, literary societies, and debating clubs. In the late 1800, the first doctorate degree was awarded by Yale University.

Throughout the early 1900, colleges and university experienced minor changes such as the separation of departments, addition of extracurricular activities, and alumni associations; until the stock market crash between 1929-1933 (Rudolph, 1990). Coker and Kisker (2000) found that roughly between 50-85% of male undergrads became unemployed. Faculty roles began to shift as tutors were hired to monitor the students. After the great depression, enrollment rose due to the lack of employment but students were unsure if they would be able to finish their degrees. At the end of the war, the GI Bill was launched, which helped aid students in finishing their degrees (Thelin, 2004).

Around the same time in 1947, President Truman authorized a report to expand the access and affordability to higher education (Rudolph, 1990). This led to an increase in adult learners, as the job market recovered. The large influx of students increased classroom sizes, as well as saw a lack of support from faculty, and limited student housing (Coker and Kisker, 2000). A large shift in higher education occurred at this same time when the courts struck down the demise of Loco Parentis affording constitutional protection to university students. Institutions could not longer control students voice, publications, or association without considering their constitutional rights (Lee, 2011). This change left students frustrated and many campuses with political unrest.

The political unrest continued with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and controversy over the Vietnam War. Many college students took an active role protesting racism, social injustices, and advocating grater rights for students in general (Lee, 2011). Tension continued to rise as students were suspended and disciplined due to participation within protest. These protest continued until the 1970s when earlier restrictions on free speech were ratified.

At the end of the 20th century, Federal funding became more stable and college campuses began to see an increase in racial and ethnic diversity amongst its students (Rudolph, 1990). The increase of extracurricular activities such as Greek Life, debate clubs, and athletics led to the separation of academia and student affairs. Each role is outlined and the focus of student affairs plays a critical role in the students' development (Coker and Kisker, 2000). Men and women dean roles are created to relieve college presidents of supervision of student activities. Enrollment continued to fluctuate amongst college campuses. Due to the instability of federal funding, many institutions have shifted their priorities to focusing on securing funding for their endowment.

Currently, college campuses continue to focus on diversity and endowment growth. Hot topics across the student affairs profession include Title IX, adult education, technology, and affordability (Ebersole, 2014; NAICU, 2014). With increased institutions and degree seeking opportunities compared to years past, enrollment levels are at an all-time high. The US department of education finds that roughly 21 million students are attending American Colleges and Universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Throughout its history, the role of higher education has shifted towards the demands of its constituents. In a generation where college enrollment is at an all-time high, institutions are seeking ways to continue to develop the collegiate experience. In previous years, emphasis has been place on the curriculum, administrative and faculty roles, and extracurricular activities. Now the focus has shifted to adult learners and this study will add to the current literature around adult learners in higher education.

Evolution of Student Affairs Masters Programs

The birth of student affairs dates back to the nineteenth century. The first responsibilities of student affairs professionals surfaced during the Colonial Residential college period. During this time, there was an influx and need for college student housing, meals, and staff to monitor these facilities. Faculty and tutors assumed administrative roles as the paternalistic faculty. Prior to the Civil war, college campuses began to shift and staff were hired to do what was known as the "unpleasant duties" of the faculty members (Barr & Desler, 2000).

The student affairs profession remained stagnant until the early 1900s. The emphasis at this time was shifting the model of American higher education. During this change, new organizational structures, new professional organizations, and evolving college atmospheres began to impact college campuses. In addition, faculty members' roles began to be more defined while the emergence of student personnel sprouted onto college campuses. On the academic side of education, the formation of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was established. On the Student Personnel side, the American Council on Education (ACE) appointed a committee to study student personnel practices in colleges and universities (Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh, 2002). The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Association of College Personnel Administrators were also influential in the development of the new profession.

The results of the student personnel committee yielded findings of consideration to view the college student as a whole, which included in the classroom, in the residence halls, and extracurricular activities. The Point of View (1937) also identified 23 job

functions and services that would eventually be classified as student affairs. Some of these positions services are financial aid, disability services, and orientation. Next, the article requested the development of a graduate study program for student personnel practioners. Finally, they challenged student affairs professionals to focus on coordinating programs and management of students, aligning the mission of the institution and programs offered on campus, and understanding the individual needs of each student (Points of View, 1937; 1949).

The 1949 Point of View revisions aligned with the challenges many college campuses were experiencing during this time such as: equal access for all, education for returning soldiers (GI Bill), and an increase in Federal funding support. These changes led to student personnel responsibilities shifting to an emphasis on student development. Research-based theory was introduced at this time to guide professionals in working with college students. With increased support for students, college campuses began creating new roles on campus known as the Student Development Educator.

The student affairs profession has grown exponentially as it has been led by NASPA and ACPA. At this time, NASPA has over 14,000 members, 2,100 member institutions, and 50 states represented, while ACPA is home to 7500 members and 1200 institutions from around the world (NASPA, 2014; ACPA, 2014). What began as a position to aid faculty in student supervision has developed into a profession that is present across college and university campuses around the world. By exploring the history of the profession of student affairs, it will help aid in the understanding of how graduate schools have shaped their masters programs.

Significance of the research

  This thesis seeks to explore the experiences of adult learners who have professional experience and are currently enrolled in Master-level student affairs graduate programs. The study examines multiple facets of the graduate school experience, which is a unique perspective. No research currently exists on the overall experiences of practiced professionals in Master-level graduate programs. The existing research on adult learners in student affairs programs focuses on constricted and specific topics such as technology in the classroom, cost associated with the degree, and curriculum and delivery (Bash, 2013; Grube et al, 2005; Strayhorn & Eckman, 2012). By addressing the experience of adult learner graduate students from multiple lenses, it will hopefully inform graduate programs of ways to improve their services, relationships, and experience of their professionally seasoned graduate students and graduate programs as a whole within higher education. In addition, by completing this research, it will be filling a void within the current literature, as a gap currently exists.

Definition of key terms

  Below is a list of key terms that are use in this study. Language used in higher education and student affairs program is often used interchangeably. The definitions of these words have been provided to supplement the reader in understanding how the terms are used in this study.

- Adult Learner - An adult learner is a student who is pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree, but does not meet the definition of a "traditional" college student. This can include a student who is employed full-time, over the age of 25, a veteran in the United States Military, additional responsibilities like a family, or

returning to school after an extended period of time (University College, 2015; Penn State, 2007).

- American College Personnel Association (ACPA) - Founded in 1924 as the National Associations of Appointment Secretaries (NAAS), it later became one of the leading associations for the student affairs profession (Komives et al, 2003).

- Master-level graduate student-A Master-level graduate student for the purpose of this study, is a college student enrolled in a 2-3 year graduate degree granting student affairs program.

- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) - NASPA is the largest professional association guiding student affairs work (Komives et al, 2013). Founded in 1919 as the "Conference of Deans and Advisers of Men" is now host to 13,000 student affairs professionals.

- Non-Traditional Graduate Student- For the purpose of this study, a Non-Traditional Graduate student is a Master-level graduate student that has worked in higher education for four or more years before pursuing a Master's degree.

- Student Affairs-Student Affairs is an area within colleges and universities concerned with the development of students outside of the classroom (Walker, 2008).

- Student Affairs Graduate Program - A Student Affairs Graduate Program for the purpose of this study is a Master-level degree granting graduate program that aims to prepare its students to work in a higher education student services roles. The graduate programs theoretical lens can be based in counseling, student development, student services, or administration.

- Student Development Theory - Student Development Theory is defined by Zuker (n.d.) as "the way a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education. Walker (2008) defines it as theories focused on how individuals who are enrolled in college coursework that incorporates physical, biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. It is used to help aid student affairs professionals in their work with college students.

- Student Services - Professional and administrative work in directing and coordinating services for students and perspective students. Service offices can include: admissions, counseling, student activities, residential life, health and wellness, diversity, financial aid, advising, enrollment, and career development.

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is constructed into five chapters. The first and current chapter offers an introduction of the study, the significance, and key terms paired with definitions utilized within this study. In addition, this chapter will provide a snapshot of the following chapters within my thesis. In chapter two, the focus is on the history, background information, and a review of the current literature available about this topic. Information found in chapter two offers a historical and professional lens to support the comprehension of this study. Chapter three is an in-depth explanation of the research methodology that takes a qualitative approach and is guided through the lens of phenomenology. Within this chapter, readers will find explanations for participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, and the limitations of the study. Chapter four is titled *"findings and discussion"* and highlights the participant's background, information

provided by the participants, and themes that emerged from the data collected. The final

chapter is conclusions and results. In chapter five, the study will be summarized and

provide recommendations and suggestions for practice and research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will review historical and relevant research that will aid in creating an understanding and purpose for which this research is being conducted. To provide context, the research topic being explored is the experiences of returning Master-level students after they have completed four or more years in a professional role within higher education. The experience among returning-Master level graduate students varies tremendously. Evaluating their student affairs Masters program proves to be a great task due to the social and academic constructs of each program; any research that does exist on this unique population does so merely on a narrowed topic or at a specific institution.

There is very little research examining the different experiences between Master-level students who have worked in the field of student affairs prior to obtaining their Masters degree compared to those who matriculate directly from their undergraduate institution. Within my research, I found that the literature that does exist focuses on narrowed topics such as adult learners in transition, characteristic of Master-level students, and developing relationships versus the students' holistic experience of a student affairs Master programs. This literature review is organized in four sections: (a) adult learning theory, (b) graduate student experience, (c) why student affairs/graduate school, and (d) program managers. These four sections were chosen as most of the research-conducted fits their framework.

Adult Learner Theory

In this section, the reader will find an overview of three adult learner theories and how they are applied to the needs of adult learners. An introduction to adult learning theory and the barriers adult learners face as they return to the college environment will

provide a compendious outlook to the current norms and societal perspective. Adult

learner attendance on college campuses has increased within the last thirty years. A 1992

study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics found that over 50% of

students enrolled in higher education courses were non-traditional. Non-Traditional is

often understood as having worked full-time, over the age of 25, or caring for a family

(Yoo &Huang, 2013). These are all examples of experiences that educators may have to

consider when working with adult learner populations. According to Conrad (1993) other

needs of adult learners include: Engaging, motivating, curriculum development and

delivery, services offered to adult learners on campus, program environments, and faculty

relationship.

      Engaging adult learners. Engaging adult learners can take the form of many

different approaches as each learner has their own set of specific needs to be successful.

Some adult learners are visual learners while others are more successful in a tactile space.

However, Yoo and Huang (2013) find that engagement goes beyond the scope of

individual learning motivation and style, adding that adult learners need substantial

institutional commitment since engaging adult learners has many stakeholders within the

college such as faculty, resource centers, and financial aid. Conrad (1993) offers a

general principle of maximizing services that are easily accessible to the students. This

can demonstrate a commitment to their success while also aiding their support of a

perplexed schedule. Conrad (1993) states:

      Various approaches to academic support services are programs that provide peer

      mentoring, mentoring, and encourage active and cooperative learning, although

the traditional programs that support specific skill development are also available

p.3.

Another idea offered to engaging adult learners is to provide an aesthetically

conducive and pleasing classroom environment. Bentham (2008) found that when

considering enhancing environments for adult learners, one must consider the following

"What are the perception of the classroom? how does your body respond when you are in

the room?, and how does the classroom affect you and your learning?", p.74. When a

welcoming environment is created for adults, the space can become more intimate and

safe for adults learners to be vulnerable in the space.

Motivating adult learners. While some adult learners are motivated by the

opportunity for improved credentials with acquiring an advanced degree, others are self-

motivated and have set specific goals. However, not all adult learners fall into the above

scenarios. In Yoo & Huang (2014) study, motivation refers to the desire or the reason

why people return to graduate school. In addition, Knefelkamp (2011) suggest that adult

learners motivation can be improved if they are treated as co-learners and allowed

ownership of their educational experience. In doing so, they will be much more invested

in their education if they feel they are covering items on their own agenda. Similar to the

belief of Knefelkamp, Bash (2003) introduces a shift in our approach of adult learners:

Until recently, higher education has relied on an endgame system. Once a learner

completes a degree program, he or she moves to a different status such as

graduate education or a career. Today, everyone is expected to continue to learn

throughout his and her entire life. In general, when a person stops pursuing new

learning, he or she is likely to become stagnant and based on the resulting loss of proficiencies--is no longer considered current or marketable, p.34.

This new approach is critical in how we work with adult learns. With the previous approach, educators have paid little attention to the experience that adult learners bring to the classroom environment. A study conducted by Yoo and Huang (2013) takes a different approach with motivation. The study finds that providing a collaborative environment, positive opportunities to influence learning, and emotional support proved to be successful making adult learners seem valued and motivated.

Curriculum and delivery. While some institutions have adopted the use of technology in the classroom such as laptops, tablets, and e-readers, others still function under textbooks and classroom lectures. In the 21st century, the way the world receives information varies across platforms that include the internet, telecommunication, and e-mail. When it comes to adult learners, it is paramount to provide multiple ways to connect to allow them to be successful. According to Renn & Jessup-Anger (2008), curriculum for student affairs graduate preparation has not changed much since the 1980s. This would imply that we are assuming that our students have not changed since the 1980s. Bash (2013) writes about the sense of urgency, stating, "The needs of adult-learner programs and classes are ever changing and the needs of adult students are more probable to shift than traditional aged students, p.35." There are different schools of thought on how curriculum should be delivered to adult learners. One of the most popular ways to connect adult learners is through online interfaces. A study conducted by the University Continuing Education Association (2002), found that 90 percent of all higher

education institutions will have eLearning programs. Conrad (1993) favors a different approach of engaging adult learners by stating:

> It is important that objectives be identified and that adult students be consulted in the development of their own curricula. Active problem solving, goal-oriented, and cooperative learning are among the more successful teaching strategies, p.4.

The Hudson River Center for Program Development (2001) aligns with the perspective that Conrad states by identifying seven principles to guide adult learners success in the classroom: (a) involve them in program planning and implementation, (b) draw upon learners experience as a resources, (c) create a climate that encourages and supports learning, (d) foster a spirit of collaboration, (e) encourage self-directed learning, (f) use small group activities to enhance learning, and (g) provide adequate support services, p 10.

Malcolm Knowles Andragogical Theory of Adult Learners. In 1968, Malcolm Knowles created a theory that emphasized the use of an andragogical approach to assist in the understanding of adult learners (Passas, 2013). The term andragogy was used in the early 1940s and is the counter part to the pedagogical approach that incorporates the needs of adult learners such as special teachers, specials methods, and special philosophy (Knowles, 1968). There are six key elements that comprise the Andragogical model. The first element is summarized as *the need to know.* Maxwell (1968) writes, "Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it. When adults undertake to learn something on their own, they will invest considerable energy in probing into the benefits they will gain from learning it and the negative consequences of not learning it". An adult learner may be faced with this element when returning back to

get their Masters. Allowing them to create their experience within the confinements of

the program requirements can enhance their experience and the energy dedicated to the

program. The second component in is *the learner's self-concept.* Adult learners have the

concept of being on their own as many of them have had to learn how to provide for a

family, care for children, or navigate their own education. Maxwell (1968) writes:

> They (adult learners) resent and resist situations in which they feel others are
>
> imposing their wills on them. But this presents a serious problem to us in adult
>
> education: the minute they walk into an activity labeled "education" or "training"
>
> or any of their synonyms, they hark back to their conditioning in their previous
>
> school experience, put on their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit
>
> back, and say "teach me" p.57-58.

Though this is not the only experience that adult learners have, it is congruent

with the current literature as one experience. Next, is element three, which is *the role of*

the learner's experience. This component explains the needs to incorporate group

discussions, peer learning, and simulation exercises. Each adult learner enters an

environment with their own experiences relating to a topic, environment, and individual.

By providing students an opportunity to discuss their experiences, it creates a space for

adult learners to speak to their own experiences, which can provide new information and

alternative lens to those who have less experience in a topical area (Maxwell, 1968).

Within student affairs, this can apply to an adult learner who has had ten years experience

working in housing operations compared to an adult leaner who has had five years as a

resident director. Each role can speak to what they have learned from their previous

experiences although they were within the same department. Element four discusses the

adult learners *readiness to learn.* Maxwell (1968) writes "adults become ready to learn things they need to know and must be able to do so in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations, p.60." Adult learners in students affairs can reach this moment when they have completely advanced in their role with only a bachelors degree or when they have maxed out pay raises until their educational level enhances. There are many other experiences in which this can take place, however, it is important to learn why adult learners return to school to get their Masters. In doing so, this will provide clarity and an ability to reach them for maximum potential and engagement. Forcing adult learners to learn before they are ready may result in low maturation and lack of interest to learn (Maxwell, 1968).

Element five emphasizes *the orientation to learn.* Andragogy orientation to learning highlights the difference between youth learners and adult learners. Adult learners being life-centered while youth learners are subject centered (Maxwell, 1968). This applies to adult learners when learning new skills or new topics. It is paramount to provide realistic experiences where they can or will use the new information required. Without context, or scenarios to apply it to, adult learners will struggle to comprehend the information (Maxwell, 1968). The final element within Maxwell's Theory of Andragogy (1968) is motivation. Maxwell writes:

> "All normal adults are motivated to keep growing and developing, but that this
>
> motivation is frequently blocked by such barriers as negative self-concept as a
>
> student, inaccessibility of opportunities or resources, time constraints, and
>
> programs that violate principles of adult learning, p.61"

This element is highly supported in the literature as Yoo (2013) finds that students that have identified motive for returning to Masters program are more likely to graduate compared to their counterparts.

Kolb's and Frye Theory of Experiential Learning. Kolb's and Frye Experiential Learning theory operates on four-stage cycle of learning where the cycles are (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation (McLeod, 2010). Kolb (1984) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience, p.38). The first level of Kolb's theory is concrete experience, which is outlined as a new experience or reinterpretation of an existing experience. For adult learners, this can occur when one decides to return to school to obtain their Masters degree. Level (2) reflective observation is defined as the new experience, particular importance or inconsistencies between experience and understanding. This occurs with adult learners as they reflect on their previous work experiences, which is different from their current status as a student. (3) Abstract conceptualization reflection gives rise to a new idea or a modification of an existing abstract. Adult learners resonate with this phase as they continue to reflect on the new opportunities their Masters degree will bring them in their professional work (Kolb, 1984). Finally, (4) active experimentation-the learner applies them to the world around them to see the results. Demonstrated through the job search process for adult learners, this phase is evident in the types of jobs they can apply for based on their new qualifications.

Schlossberg Theory of Transition Schlossberg's theory of transition is comprised of four main components that help aid in the understanding of adults in

transition and allowing educators to provide adequate support and resources to accommodate the transition (Evans et al, 2010). Transitions are not limited to adult learners; however, the type of transitions adult learners face can have a severe impact on their lives. When applying Schlossberg's theory of transition, the positive outcome can be an adult student successful completing requirements to fulfill their Masters degree. Conversely, if a transition is negative, this may lead to the adult learner feeling overwhelmed and withdrawing from their academic institutions.

According to Goodman et al (2006), transition is defined as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles". For adult learners, transition can be returning to graduate school after working full-time, adapting to technology being used in the classroom, or completing coursework as a distance learner. The impact of each transition will be determined by how much significance is placed on it by adult learners. Aforementioned above, the Schlossberg Theory of Transition has four main components: (1) situation, (2) self, (3) support, and (4) strategies (Goodman et al, 2006). An example of Schlossberg's first component can be seen in the adult learner experience when adult learners return to graduate school after working full time. The impact of this experience can vary from student to student, as one student will adjust well and find resources on campus by exploring campus while another student will need more direct support from administrators. Next is self, which is the action or behavior in which the adult learner responds to the situation. This can mean asking questions of professors and seeking extra help to navigate the transition independently. The third component, support can be seen in an adult learner who is comfortable expressing concerns to faculty and program managers to help ease the transition. By

doing so, this will allow the adult learners to feel calm and receive guidance en route to their completion of their degree. Another example of support can be an adult learner receiving support and guidance from their partner/spouse. Evans et al (2010) finds that a family can provide an intimate and reliable type of support. The final behavior strategy describes students' actions in an effort to accommodate and cope with the transition. Strategies for adult learners in transition can take the form of seeking extra help from campus resources, adding a part-time job to fulfill their connection to working, or enrolling in a computer science course to improve computer skills. Utilizing Schlossberg's theory of transition and the four components can lead to a clearer understanding of adult learners and the impact transitions can have on their experience of graduate school. In the previous section, we explored the use of adult theory in the classroom. This information was used to provide the reader with multiple approaches that student affairs professional's use when working with the adult learner population.

Utilizing theory can provide insight into the experiences of adult learners; however, there are some limitations to using theory. A limitation of utilizing theory is it creates a preconceived notion of what can and will happen. According to Creswell (1998), theory provides an explanation, a predication, and generalizations about how the world operates, p. 84. Due to the unreliability of theory, it is hard to fully commit to utilizing adult learning theory as the demands and needs of each student frequently change. In this study, theory is intended to inform educators of previous experiences of adult learners.

Graduate Student Life Balance

In this section, I will explore the demands of graduate students. Master-level graduate students are the primary focus of this study. Each student has a list of demands that influence their life. This section highlights ways an educator can promote healthy life balance within their students. Throughout the literature, there is a consensus that no graduate student experience is the same. Graduate students battle the thought of inadequacy, the lack of balance and time management, and the inability to cope with returning to the classroom as adult learners (Duvall, 2008). The problems do not end there. Graduate students are a very high risk population as a 2004 Berkeley study found that over 50% reported having emotional or stress related problems and almost 10% of its graduate population admitted considering or attempting suicide while in graduate school (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006). The Council of Graduate School (2009) found that 81% of students enrolled in graduate programs were adult learners. It is critical to pay attention and provide graduate students with the support and resources to be successful the majority of them are adult learners. Educators should also consider utilizing adult learners as resources.

Grube, Cedarholm, Jones, and Dunn (2005) writes that graduate students offer significant resources to student affairs divisions at significantly lower cost than that of a full-time staff members and are the future of the profession. It is important to examine the demands placed upon our graduate population. A reoccurring theme in the literature pertaining to graduate student success is that of life-balance. In this review, balance is defined as finding a personal equilibrium in the four major life roles of family, work, leisure, and education (Hansen, 1997). For graduate students returning to Masters

program, educators often task them with an overwhelming number of pages to read for homework, have them work over their allotted time requirement to fulfill assistantships, and give little thought and regards to their personal life (Kuther, 2003). In Grube et al, (2005), one participant wrote:

> I'd like to be able to say that family is my first priority, but to be honest it's not.... Class constantly interferes with other things in my life because of the time it requires. Family is really important to me, but right now they're on hold because I have to make it through this, p.157.

In addition, student affairs as a profession can be a very demanding and can result in professionals working 60-70 hour work weeks on a regular basis (Grube et al, 2005). With this approach in graduate preparation programs, we are not setting the students up to be successful or modeling the expectations we set in balancing life demands.

Another theme that is highlighted within research pertaining to the graduate experience is the lack of connections made outside of the work environment. The research highlights the needs for graduate students to get involved with professional associations as a way to find mentors or improve their educational and professional experience (Lechuga, 2011).

An aspect of life balance that has limited research available is relationship building. Grube et al (2005) found that relationships and life played a critical role in helping students achieve their goal of obtaining a Masters degree. Duvall (2008) also found that identifying isolation in the graduate experience and taking breaks will lead to a more enjoyed experience. Highlighting isolation can also have a negative effect on gradate students and emphasizes the need for graduate students to identify ways to

become engaged outside of the graduate programs which adds to their workload. While the research outlined above is important in understanding the experiences of graduate students, this researcher has found that these studies often assume that all adult learners are young professionals that need professional experience and networking to advance in their career versus including those professionals who have a significant amount of work experience In addition, this approach neglects the support that some adult learners are interested in only the credentials after their names versus an actual graduate student experience.

A third theme that is discussed in the literature of graduate student balance is the concept of empowering students to take ownership of their own education. Duvall (2008) offers several suggestions for students to aid their attempt to achieve balance and mental health by stating that graduate students should: "set personal and professional goals for meetings, be judicious with the word 'no', know how to ask for help, take breaks, rework your schedule, and reexamine your goals often", p. 12-13. The following quote from Grube et al (2005) accurately describes the need for balance for graduate student:

> "I think something I have especially learned this year is that in order to have balance, you have to have time for yourself. I've had some days when I know that I have something that really needs to be done, and I just stop and recognize that my mental and personal well-being is more important" (p. 160).

As adult learners return to Master degree programs for different reasons, this is one approach that can easily be adapted across programs to ensure their success.

Why Student Affairs Master Programs

This section highlights reasons why students enter student affairs Masters program. According to Taub & McEwen (2006), the decision to enter the field of students is not well understood as no bachelors degree program is directly correlated to working in higher education. Similar to the many reasons adult learners choose to return to graduate school, there are several influences that contribute to professionals' decision to enter into the field of student affairs. In 2007, there were over 2.2 millions students enrolled for graduate study and of that 2.2 million, six hundred thousand earned a Masters degree (The Almanac of Higher Education, 2009). With these types of figures, the need to increase these statistics and to know 'why' is important, as it will help aid educators in supporting adult learners. The graduate experience, unlike that of the undergraduate experience has not been widely researched; specifically there are few studies that explore why students enroll in graduate school (Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012). The research that does exist emphasizes motivation to obtain a graduate degree, how students identified student affairs as a career, and how students decide which graduate program they will attend.

Entering Student Affairs. It is unclear on how professionals end up in the field of student affairs, as there is no direct undergraduate degree path that leads to the profession. The needs of adult learners vary from those within the traditional undergraduate population. Adult learners often have to take into account partner/spouses, children, and financial cost associated with returning to school (Gast, 2013). Higher education environments have become increasingly complex with the rise of tuition, declining appropriations and endowments, and increasing competition into top graduate

programs (Mertz, Strayhorn, & Eckman, 2012). Understanding why a person chooses a profession and professional/graduate program can help Master level programs in catering to specific populations. Taub & McEwen (2006) writes "Understanding what influences a person to enter the student affairs profession is important in recruiting high quality students to student affairs and in diversifying the program, p.206.

A 1991 study by Richmond & Hunter, 1992 identified two paths that led students to pursue student affairs: previous employment in offices within student affairs divisions and the encouragement of student affairs professionals (Richmond & Hunter, 1992). Taub & McEwen (2006) found that roughly 89% of student affairs professionals surveyed identified talking with student affairs professionals as their means of entering the field, 82% identified student involvement in student activities, and 82% found student affairs through browsing graduate school catalogs. The unclear understanding of how adult learners find their ways into the field of student affairs contributes to the complexities of their experience due to the lack of structured support systems. Despite having no clear undergraduate majors into student affairs, there are common paths students take to enter the profession.

Choosing a program. In a study conducted by Talbot, Maier, and Rushlau (1996) on doctoral candidates in student affairs, six factors were identified that contributed to the greatest influence in the participants' decision to attend a specific program: Financial incentives, location of program and flexibility of the program, reputation of the (program, faculty, and graduates) the division of student affairs, and structural considerations. Kallio (1995) found similar factors contributing tot their decisions as well as several others identified as: Spouses plan, ability to continue working in current role, research

opportunities, campus life, social opportunities, and recruitment efforts. A third

publication, Forney, (1994) explores 16 different Master level graduate programs

attitudes and learning style in student affairs. Forney states, "reasons people choose the

profession are working with students, contributing to students' development, and the

attractiveness of the college atmosphere" p.430. While there is research exploring the

topic of choosing student affairs graduate programs, there are no concrete requirements

that all students consider when selecting a program. The need to understand why students

choose specific programs is evident.

Program Managers, Staff, and Faculty

This section exists to highlight the current literature that examines the

relationships between students, faculty, and campus administrators. Faculty and program

managers interact with student everyday and are often in positions of power over the

students.

Prior to starting their first academic course, graduate students have had one or

more interactions with student affairs program managers or faculty. The literature around

attracting the best students is plentiful, however, research is missing on how to support

students to ensure they graduate (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). New York State (2001)

states, " the key to any effective adult education program is the quality of the staff, and in

particular, the skills and commitment of the instructional staff " p.14. Additionally, they

offer characteristic traits they have found effective staff to possess:

> Enthusiastic learning and teaching style, well-grounded in effective teaching and
>
> assessment methods, thoroughly familiar with the principles of adult education
>
> and the characteristics of adult learners, creative enough to contextualize learning,

tapping into student's life experiences, learner-centered, connecting learning to students individual goals and expectations, and good listeners and sensitive to cultural diversity issues.

Managing students' expectation. The role of faculty in student affairs graduate programs varies from institution to institution (New York State, 2001). There is very little research to compare roles across programs. The literature that does exist focuses on developing relationships with the student to ensure both faculty and student benefit from the experience. The first topic discussed in the literature is student expectations and satisfaction. Appelton-Knapp & Krentler (2006) explains student satisfaction as:

Students' satisfaction with their educational experience, similar to customer satisfaction is the result of a complex set of factors. Understanding what those factors are and how they combine to influence satisfaction is critical to educators who believe that student satisfaction n addition to learning is a desired outcome of their efforts, p.254.

We often measure student satisfaction at the end of a semester/quarter or experience, however when measuring satisfaction post hoc, it requires students to remember their prior expectations at the same time as they judge whether or not their expectations have been met (Cave, Hanney, Henkel, & Kogan, 1997). There is little research discussing incorporating student expectations at the beginning of an experience. Research suggests that students benefit from listing and discussing expectations at the beginning of a course (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006).

The literature also discusses the perception of faculty, staff, and student relationships in graduate programs as it relates to power and conflict resolution. For many

years, faculty perceived that there were not conflicts or barriers between graduate

students and administrators (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010). This perception is due to

the students utilizing accommodating and avoidance behaviors instead of confronting

faculty about their issues (Holton, 1998). However, research shows that the students'

perceptions vary from the faculty. Students often feel that conflict with their advisors

hinders their progress toward their degree. In a study conducted by Brockman, Nunez, &

Basu (2010), one student shared their thought on avoidance, "To prevent conflict, I am

careful of what I say on certain topics (that) you know could have bad consequences so

you wisely avoid them", p. 288. Another student wrote "

> The advisor doesn't really stick to the schedule that we came up with, and so we
>
> find ourselves starting to hold off coming into the office until noon, because we
>
> know if we come in at 8am, they will have us working until 5. So, if we come in
>
> at noon, they only have us for 5 hours, and then we are closer to our 20 hours a
>
> week, p. 288.

The second point offers insight on how students should perceive faculty and

program managers. Program faculty are perceived to bare great power and are often

perceived as paternalistic authorities (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010). Raman (2014)

offers a way to remedy this perception and writes, "Think of us as coaches. The premise

for graduate school is that you have approached a group of scientist because we have

something to teach that you actively want to learn, p.10". To aid faculty in developing

meaningful and healthy relationships, Graduate deans are working with faculty on

conflict management techniques (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010). Duvall (2008)

suggests, "To keep relationships professional; While many student/advisor relationships

can eventually grow into a person friendship, making this assumption too early can be

disastrous...To maintain a professional advisor/student relationship, be prepared for each

meeting with written goals and an agenda", p. 12. This aligns with the first point and

expectations of roles should be discussed earlier in the students' graduate career.

Developing graduate students. Quality practice in student affairs relies heavily

on the knowledge, skills, values, ethics, and character of its practitioners (Creamer,

Janosik, Winston, and Kuk, 2001). However, a critical lens should be brought to the

frame in which we do so. According to Girves & Wemmerus (1988) few studies have

focused on graduate student retention compared to the emphasis being placed on

recruiting the best and/or underrepresented students into graduate programs. An emerging

approach in higher education is the use of learning communities (LC) to address gaps in

knowledge. Krakas (2008) writes, Historically, a major goal of LCs was to increase

undergraduate student success and retention. However, in the past several years, LCs are

being studied as a strategy to improve graduate student retention.

In addition to learning communities, a second approach to developing graduate

students is an emphasis in improving specific skills. Steve Tyrell (2014) offers several

opportunities to promote and support quality student affairs professionals: Employ

credentialed professionals, invest and diversity professional development, assessment,

politicizing the student agenda, utilizing student learning outcomes, and being the

"college with no borders". It is unclear what the specific role is of student affair program

faculty and administrators.

An under analyzed resource is professional associations and their role in ensuring

a high quality workforce. The two guiding organizations for student affairs professionals

are the National Associations of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the

American College Personnel Association (ACPA). NASPA is the larger of the two with

14,00 members, 2100 institutions from all 50 states and 25 countries represented

(NASPA, 2015). In 2010, the NASPA Board of Directors and the ACPA governing board

approved the following competencies to guide the profession: Advising and helping,

assessment, evaluation, and research, equity, diversity, and inclusion, ethical professional

practice, history, philosophy and values, human and organizational resources, law, policy,

and governance, leadership, personal foundation, and student learning and development

(NASPA, 2015). These competencies above are some of the widely discussed topics

within the profession. ACPA offers different goals and needs of the profession.

> According to ACPA (2014), the mission of their organization is:
>
> "ACPA supports and fosters college student learning through the generation and
>
> dissemination of knowledge, which informs policies, practices and programs for
>
> student affairs professionals and the higher education community" The core
>
> values of ACPA are: Education and development of the total students, diversity,
>
> multicultural competence and human dignity, inclusiveness in and access to
>
> association-wide involvement and decision making, free and open exchange of
>
> ideas in a context of mutual respect, advancement and dissemination of
>
> knowledge relevant to college students and their learning, continuous professional
>
> development and personal growth of student affairs and student services
>
> professionals, and outreach and advocacy on issues of concern to students, student
>
> affairs, and service professionals in higher education. NASPA and ACPA offer a
>
> clear outline of competencies, basic skills, and attributes student affairs

professional should possess. The next section explores the missions and

competencies of each institution compared to those outlined by NASPA and

ACPA.

Graduate Programs. Student affairs graduate programs vary across the United States.

Each programs has created their own identity while upholding the mission of the

institution and the values of the profession. Despite NASPA and ACPA identifying key

traits and minimal skills required to perform in this profession, not all programs align

their values to the guiding associations. This is evident in the exploration of participant

graduate programs.

The first institution is a student affairs program at a large research institution on

the West coast. It has identified a mission and several key competencies to fulfill their

mission. These competencies consist of diversity, increasing technology use, creating

opportunity for research, and improving communication skills. Other focus topics

mentioned include: History of higher education, exploring a critical lens of student

services, offering professional development opportunities, exploring student populations,

and organizational management.

Next, located on the West coast, a large research institution offers a higher

education program that values scholars, aims to foster research and social justice amongst

its students. It identifies goals and outcomes graduates can expect to achieve upon

completion of their degree: ability to comprehend and implement theory into practice,

understand academics and its role with research and assessment, apply counseling skills

to everyday experiences, and to foster knowledge and understanding of self.

The third institution is a large research institution in the Midwest and has a student affairs program that offers different tracks for its students. Track options include but are not limited to academic advising, working with student athletes, and other administrative roles throughout higher education. This program offers more flexibility in curriculum than the others previously mentioned. 20 plus credit hours of core work and 10 plus credits left for electives and specialty focuses.

Institution four is a mid-size private institution with a religious affiliation. It has a long-standing student affairs Masters program. Although the direct mission statement of the program was not readily accessible, they have outlined several learning outcomes for their graduates: Understanding the students they interact with, clear knowledge of the profession, meeting the demanding needs of student services, effective communication, incorporating a religious perspective into their work, supporting diversity, and demonstrating ethical leadership.

The fifth and final institution is a mid-size institution in the Midwest. This institution highlights the benefits it aims to provide students as: Opportunity for an increased number of professional roles, online, weekend, and evening classes offered to accommodate staff and students demanding lives, a "one stop shop" for all the students need including but not limited to academic advising, certification, and internship placement. One of the biggest highlights the institution offers is a commitment to professional growth and development.

The profession of student affairs is at a very pivotal point in its history. NASPA and ACPA have taken a critical approach to review the past, present, and future of student affairs (Torres et al, 2010). The tasked forced assigned to this duty has challenged

institutions and professionals to re-evaluate their graduate programs, the needs of their students, and the needs of the profession. Highlighting a unified voice for student affairs, success for all students, responding to the diversity of students (Torres et al, 2010). The institutions in this study have lacked a critical lens aligning the values, demands, and infrastructure of their programs as it pertains to the professions guiding associations. By taking charge now, institutional programs can identity what matters now to its students and what model will provide a sustainable future for the profession.

Conclusion

As the number of adult learners attending graduate school at colleges and universities continues to increase, there needs to be more research focusing on individual populations and experiences of this groups. The first step towards achieving this goal is to acknowledge the different needs of adult learners. By doing so, educators offer control to the adult learners to take ownership of their experience and open lines of communication that can improve the overall experiences of the student and institution.

This chapter included published information on adult learning theory, graduate students life style, balance, and demands, relationship dynamics of faculty, staff, and the students, and why student affairs. The use of the literature provided in this research can be utilized to better understand adult learners. Reviewing current research and literature on graduate students and adult learners provided adequate information to generate a comprehensive lens from which I performed this study. In this study, the experience of Master-level graduate students returning to graduate school after four or more years of professional experience was explored. In the next chapter, the methodology and research process are explained.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study, I examined the experiences of self-identified Master-level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Masters program. In the first chapter, the topic of study was explained including terms associated with the study and the significance of the study related to student affairs. Within chapter two, relevant research and background information was provided to establish a framework for this study. This chapter will serve the purpose of reviewing the overall research questions, highlighting the significance of this study, and explaining the methodology used in this study. Chapter three will also outline the researchers perspective, the design chosen, methods used to collect data, and the approach to data analysis.

The focus of this study is to comprehend the experiences of Master-level graduate students who returned to student affairs programs after working four or more years in higher education. Findings of this study will contribute and broaden the existing literature on adult learners in student affairs programs. In addition, a secondary focus is placed on providing Master-level student affair programs with the results and data analysis from the research project. The current literature on adult learners consist of utilization of technology to educate students, adapting to the demands of the non-traditional student experience, and adjusting classroom expectations to meet the needs of the students. The literature is currently lacking in-depth qualitative research exploring the experiences of students within student affairs programs, individual students reasons for choosing their student affairs programs, and individual expectations of program and degree. With that being said, a gap of knowledge currently exists.

The research questions that guided this study are: a. what are the experiences of Master-level graduate students who enter graduate school with four or more years experience? b) what have been the challenges associated with being in a Masters program with experience in higher education? c) what have been the strengths and weakness associated with being in a Masters program with experience in student affairs? and d.) what supports are needed to create a welcoming/safe place for returning Master-level graduate students?

Research Perspective

The qualitative methodology was chosen for this study to highlight the current lived experiences of Master-level students who have worked in higher education for four or more years before returning to get their Masters degree. Creswell (2008) defines qualitative research as:

> A type of educational research in which the research relies on the views of participants; ask broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner (p.46).

Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study was written though my own perspective. The data has been interpreted through my educational background, lived experiences, and worldview. I share similar experiences with my study participants. I identify as a Master-level graduate student who has worked four or more years in higher education before returning to obtain my Master's degree, I am currently enrolled in a Masters program, and I am over the age of eighteen. The study and data collected has been interpreted

through the lens as the qualities listed above. This chapter will further discuss the design

of the study, sampling and participant recruitment, and the data collection and analysis.

Research Design

The strategy that guided this qualitative research project was Phenomenology.

Jones et al (2014) characterizes phenomenology as the essence of a particular

phenomenon or live experience. One of the most paramount components of

phenomenology is identifying a phenomenon. As the researcher, I selected a population

with unique attributes to participate in this qualitative research. Upon consent, I utilized

one-on-one interviews that were also video/audio taped to collect qualitative data from

participants on their experience within their graduate study program. The students and

their experiences are the phenomenon is this study. The interviews were used to create a

safe environment and opportunity to receive data to address the initial research questions

of the study. This method was chosen due to the importance of each individual

participant interviewed and their experiences with their graduate program.

Participants. As the researcher, I planned to conduct one-on-one interviews with

students who met the minimal criterion. The criteria being a) Over the age of 18, b) at

least in their second year of their Master's level program in student affairs, and c) had

four or more years working in higher education before returning to gain their Masters

degree. Students were chosen based off of self-identification when contacting the

researcher. Students who have completed at least one year of their graduate program were

emphasized with the belief that they would provide greater qualitative data from their

experiences versus students still in their first year. Second year students will have a)

gathered one full year of experience in their program b) received more required course

work and faculty members, and c) had more time to travel to conferences for professional development opportunities.

Data Collection

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher read the consent statement to participants and requested a verbal consent as well as if participants had any questions regarding the study or the informed consent document (Appendix C). Upon consenting, participants were screened for eligibility to ensure they qualified (Appendix B). Once it was determined that a participant met the eligibility requirements, the interviews began.

The researcher conducted six, semi-structured interviews that lasted between 20-30 minutes. The interviews utilized Skype video chat and took place inside a locked conference/office suite. The semi-structured interviews consisted of asking seventeen predetermined questions (Appendix A) that were created with the influence of the current literature. The semi-structure allows the researcher to follow up with clarifying questions. When the interview questions were completed, three predetermined demographic (Dependents, gender, and relationship status,) questions were asked. The researcher then asked participants if they had any final thoughts, questions, or concerns. If there were no further questions, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and participation. In addition, they informed the participants that they would receive a transcribed copy of the interview to verify the information was received accurately. This was done to increase the trustworthiness of the answers provided in the interview.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the collected data, I used a coding procedure as outlined by Merriam (2009), which identifies coding as:

You begin working through the first interview…jotting down notes and assigning

codes to pieces of data. After working through the entire transcript in this manner,

you go back over your marginal notes and comments and try to group those

comments and notes that seem to go together (p.179).

Preparation. In order to prepare the data for analysis, the audio recordings were

transcribed into a script via Express Scribe. All written transcriptions were saved

in Microsoft Word to provide clarity, organizations, and easy access to the files.

Each interview transcription was labeled individually under date and pseudonym

to provide further decipherability. In addition the researcher kept a running

spreadsheet of all participants with the following information: Name, pseudonym,

institution pseudonym, and interview dates. These files were placed in

corresponding folder on the hard drive and encrypted with a password. All hand

written notes were typed at the conclusion of each interview and original copies

are stored in a locked office.

Analysis- My primary goal with the data analysis was to translate the collected

data from participants of the research into a comprehensive model that is clear

and understood by an uninformed person. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) explain

analysis as "...an opportunity for producing a series interpretations that subdivide

findings, not only according to logical topic segments, but also with genres or

other representational medial" (p.413). This approach to data analysis was formed

by my own interpretation of the meaning. Exploring my identity as a returning

adult Master -level student who worked in higher education for several years prior

to returning to obtain my Masters degree. I currently hold knowledge related to

Non-Traditional students in student affairs, student development theory, and the barriers associated with being an adult learner. The analysis of the data was completed utilizing that framework.

For analysis, I reviewed each participant interview and began writing notes of possible categories based on responses. Merriam (2009) states "the process beings with reading the first interview transcript, the first set of field notes, the first document collected in the study. As you read down through the transcript...you jot down notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins." (p. 178). Upon completion of reviewing the six transcripts, I combined my notes. For each individual question addressed, I placed them into different categories based on their responses.

Once all categories were completed, I assessed all the interviews as a whole. Through combining themes, trends, and experiences, I had the opportunity to identify patterns within all of the participants. Examining the data further will explain and provide in depth experiences that are shared and differ which will be provided in chapter four.

Strategies to Ensure Protection of Human Participants

When working with human participants in a study, it was paramount for me to be aware of how important privacy and confidentiality are. In order to protect the participants, I received the most up to date human subject protection training. Throughout the study, I took necessary steps to align the research process with the proper procedures as to protect the identities and institutions affiliated with my participants.

One step taken to protect the identity of participants was the use of
pseudonyms for their name as well as for the institution in which the study took
place. At the beginning of each interview, I mentioned that the participant would
have the opportunity to choose a name for themselves and institution to be used in
the written analysis of the study.

To ensure the study was making an extensive effort to protect its
participants and align with ethical research practices, the study was reviewed and
approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the host institution where
participants were contacted. The IRB approved the study protocol, the interview
questions, the recruitment documents, the informed consent, and methods for
recruitment. The interview questions and recruitment email can be found in the
appendix. In addition, I worked with my thesis committee comprised of faculty at
Creek University (CU) who all have had previous experience working with
human subjects.

Limitations of Study

With every study, comes with variables that are present in the data
collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study. It is important as a researcher
that I am cognizant and acknowledge how they present in this study. By
identifying the boundaries of the study, an open mind lens of reference can be
applied to process the outcomes.

Sample size. The sample size of this study relies on the snowball
sampling technique. A snowball technique is a technique for gathering subjects
through the identification of an initial subject who is used to provide the names of

other qualified participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). The number of qualified participants will rely on the direction and success of the snowball sampling technique.

Generalizability. Acknowledging the limitations in the proposed study will ensure that the results are used for their intended purpose and accurately. The narrow scope of the target population of this projected research is the major limitation of this study. The data collected and results produced are only applicable to student affairs Master's programs and adult learners who meet the study's demographic qualification. Although the data collected may be used at other institutions and graduate programs with similar student make up, a level of speculation would be present.

Throughout this project, I put forth measures to obtain a representative sample of participants, but variables out of my control were present and could potentially influence the data. All the participants who enrolled in the study were willing to participant, which resulted in this being a convenience sample. The results of these participants cannot be generalized to all returning Master-level students in student affairs programs. This is a confined case that offers an explanation of the experiences of several adult learners in Master-level student affairs graduate programs.

Future research can address these limitations by using broader participant qualifications, a larger represented sample population, and increasing the number of participants who can enroll in the study. Future research may also include separating populations by race, directly matriculated graduate students, or

focusing on just one institution. By exploring different options to obtain data or manipulating the research questions, future research can produce different results.

Biases of Researcher. The information collected in the interviews was analyzed and interpreted through my epistemological perspective as a mid-level student affair professional, an adult learner, and a graduate student. Before and during the duration of this research study, I was employed at HU in the Student Leadership and Activities department where I oversaw Non-Traditional student services and transfer student affairs. In my role, I had regular interactions with adult learners, faculty, and graduate students from colleges and universities around the United States. There were many pre-established relationships with adult learners and thus presents a strong bias for the research. These existing relationships may have had an effect on the acquisition of participants in the study, the willingness of institutions to pass on the call for participants, the follow-up questions that may be asked within the interview, or questions asked by participants during the interview portion of the study.

Though there is a personal interest that biases the research, my pre-established relationships while working at HU demonstrates students' ability and comfort with sharing their personal experience with me. Due to my familiarity to the adult learning community, adult learners may be more willing to share about their Master-level graduate experience as a student who previously or currently works full-time. This association might have had a positive impact on participation and response. Though it is troublesome to comprehend how my

identities and prior knowledge may have impacted this study, there is personal bias present.

Summary

Within this chapter, the methodology of the study was reviewed. In this study, I explored the experience of Master-level graduate students who have previous student affairs work experience prior to returning to obtain their Masters degree. The primary focus of the study was to gain clarity around their experience as previous professionals in the field compared to the identity of a graduate student. Six students who fit the criterion were selected as participants and interviewed for the study. After transcribing the interviews, the data was analyzed and coded to identify themes throughout the interviews and placed into separate categories. There were protective actions taken to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner and that limitations of the study were identified. The timeframe of this study lasted October 6th 2014, the date of the IRB approval, through all the research steps concluding with the defense presentation of the thesis in May 2015.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the results of the study. The results chapter will consist of details on each participant and themes that emerged from data analysis. The information provided by the participants united together offered the base of material from which I could identify themes. The themes will be explained in chapter four, including quotes and explanations.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussions

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Master-level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Master's program. This chapter provides an overview of the study participants as well as presents the detailed findings based upon the collected qualitative data. The results have been arranged into five general themes, with three of the themes having subthemes:

1. Motivation for returning to graduate school

2. Academia

    a. Experiences in the classroom

    b. Evaluation of courses and curriculum

3. Professional Development Opportunities

4. Relationships

    a. Experience with Faculty/Staff

    b. Experience with Peers

5. Cost associated with the Program

    a. Assistantship

    b. Out of pocket expense

Themes were examined and discussed using direct quotes from the participants. The themes identified were ones shared by each participant. If a theme did not resonate with each participant it was noted within the results narrative. While more than five themes were present for all participants, the researcher selected themes and quotes that were most common among all participants.

Participants

Six Master-level graduate students participated in this study. Each participant met the three minimal eligibility requirements of (a) being enrolled as at least a second-year student in a student affairs Master's-level graduate program, (b) previously worked four or more years in higher education before enrolling in graduate school, and (c) is over the age of 18. To aid in maintaining confidentiality, each participant in the study selected a pseudonym for themselves and their institution. Table 1 below is an overview of participants' responses and is organized by (a) pseudonym for this study, (b) pseudonym for their host institution, (c) academic year in graduate school, (d) their enrollment status, (e), self-identified ethnicity, (f) relationship status at the time of enrollment, (g) number of dependents, and (h) their self-identified gender.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information.

Pseudonym	Institution	Year in school	Enrollment Status	Identified Ethnicity	Relationship Status at time of enrollment	Dependents (How many)	Gender
Shawna Reese	Golden University	Second	Full-Time	Multi-Racial	Relationship, not married	Yes, 1	F
Marrion Morris	Beach University	Second	Part-Time	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 2	M
Norah Simpson	Rosemont State University	Second	Part-time	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes, 2	F
Ashley Jo Tanner	Houndsville University	Second	Full-Time	Caucasian	Married	No	F
Annie Matthews	Tundra University	Second	Full-Time	White	Single	No	F

Ann Lutheran	Justice Central University	Second Year	Full-Time	White/American	Relationship (Not Married)	No	F

Shawna. Shawna was a second-year student in her master's degree program. After graduating from undergrad with her bachelors degree, she worked in primary education for several years in a different country. After a few years, she realized that she desired to work with adult learners and knew that she would have to improve her credentials to be considered for positions. She then uprooted her family to pursue her Master's degree at Golden University (GU).

Marrion. Marrion described his life as chaotic and busy. He was in his second year of his master's program as a full-time student during this research, but proposed shifting his enrollment status to part-time and completing a third year of his program. Outside of being a full-time student, Marrion was also the Executive Director of his own company. Prior to enrolling into graduate school, Marrion worked in higher education for over 13 years in various roles. As a non-traditional undergraduate student, he is familiar with the process of not sharing similar experiences with his collegiate peers.

Norah. Norah participated in this study from a large research one institution in the mid-west. As a second year part-time student, Norah planned to graduate in the spring of 2016 with her Master's degree. Prior to enrolling into graduate school, Norah worked in higher education for 10 years at the same institution. Norah continued to work in her professional role while taking about six credit hours per semester.

Ashley Jo. Ashley Jo was a full-time second year student at Houndsville University (HU). HU is a large research institution located in the Midwest. Before returning to pursue her Masters degree, Ashley Jo worked in higher education for four

years in academia as an instructor. Norah really valued teaching and identified interest in pursuing her doctorate degree upon completion of her Master's.

Annie. Annie was enrolled in her second and last year at Tundra University (TU). She entered her Master's program bringing about five years of higher education experience. Annie found her way into higher education on accident. She found employment at a local college after her bachelor's degree in an advancement office. After her tenure in that role, she knew she wanted to stay in higher education but knew it required obtaining a Master's degree.

Ann. Ann participated in this study from a private institution located on the West coast. She worked six years in higher education before attempting to work full-time and attended school part-time in a MBA graduate program. After experiencing that program for a year, she withdrew herself from that program track. Next, she found a program that allowed her to apply for advanced positions in higher education. She enrolled in that program in the fall of 2013 and anticipated graduation in the spring of 2015.

Thematic Summary

A summary of the findings was organized into five theme areas with three themes containing sub-themes: a) motivation for returning to graduate school, b) academia (i. experiences in the classroom, ii. evaluation of curriculum and courses), c) professional development opportunities, d) relationships (i. with faculty/staff, ii. with peers), and e) cost associated with the program (i. assistantship, ii. out of pocket cost). The five themes were interwoven and discussed amongst all participants providing multiple perspectives to the graduate student experience. Each theme was analyzed and supported utilizing direct quotations from participants' interviews.

Motivation for returning to graduate school

All participants shared their motivation for enrolling into graduate school after working in a professional setting for several years. It was clear that each participant allowed their own journey and life experiences to dictate their decision. Marrion credited his return to his discovery of passion for education later in his life while Norah identified the anticipation of retirement of her boss as motivation for attending graduate school. Despite all sharing different personal experiences, the majority responses were directed to an opportunity for advancement within the field:

> MARRION: For me, education is something I didn't pursue until my late 30s and I think I was lucky enough to work in higher education at a community college dealing with students for a good 10 years and I really enjoyed it...the thought of pursuing this at a higher level is something that I really desired.

Norah framed her motivation to return when she was informed of the departure of a supervisor. She saw the departure of her supervisor as a clear opportunity to move up the organizations chart. When asked what was her motivation for returning to graduate school, she replied:

> NORAH: A lot of this was because my boss was going to retire and I got to a certain level in my career where you started to need a master's to keep advancing...and since they are in the process...I originally wanted to fill their shoes, but now I am not quite sure...this move has triggered me to start thinking that I should probably get my master's whether I want that position (bosses) or another one totally different. It will be the same situation where most jobs are master's minimum anyway...so that is my primary motive.

The same pattern of advancement continued for both Annie and Ann. Ashley Jo introduced a different perspective for returning to obtain a Master's degree by stating:

> ASHLEY JO: The particular field...college student development played a big role in my decision to return to graduate school. I previously taught at an institution of higher learning and when I arrived at this institution to seek employment, they said without a Ph.D. I could not teach here. That is when I decided to enroll in the Master's degree program...which would lead to different opportunities and the

ability to continue to work with students at the college level, which is important to me.

Summary of motivation for returning to graduate school. The theme of Motivation for returning to graduate school identified why graduate students returned to Master's programs after working four or more years in higher education. By distilling this theme of motivation, I was able to organize factors participants shared regarding their motivation to obtain a Master's degree and what they hoped to accomplish once they completed their degrees. The overall reasons for returning to school were identified as opportunity for advancement and career opportunities.

Academic Experience

Academic experience was a common theme that surfaced among participants during the data analysis. Each participant described their experiences inside the classroom, in addition to their evaluation of curriculum and courses. After further analysis, the theme was split into two sub-themes a) experience in the classroom and b) evaluation of curriculum and courses.

Experience in the classroom. After reviewing the current literature, academia was a theme the researcher anticipated would surface. However, it did not surface in the same lens as previous literature explores; graduate students taking ownership of their education. Several participants found that their experiences in the classroom were beneficial. For example, the following three quotes portray exactly what they experienced:

> "Faculty always encouraged me to talk because of my unique perspective. I never once have been shutdown, they always really try to be encouraging with appreciating the insight I give and what I have been through and what I saw growing up and they really encourage me to share that with the class"-Marrion

"Most of the time, I am okay. I find myself trying to keep the conversation going...I feel like I am asking the professors more than some of the other students...I think I am this way because I have experience in the field and I know what I expect and need to learn. I would have never been this way if I did not have the experience of working before returning"-Norah

"I think because the faculty are all practitioners, they have organized classes for the most part with adult learners in mind. They ask for our expertise and opinion to be shared freely in the classroom"-Shawna

It seemed that in the classroom, participants felt safe and connected to what they had learned, in addition to support of faculty adapting the classroom to meet their needs. Each student's experience in the classroom played a role in how they interacted with their faculty and peers in their graduate program. For four of the participants—Marrion, Ashley, Shawna and Norah, the experience seemed to be positive and had no negative impact on their graduate experience.

Evaluation of curriculum and courses. After researching each participant's host institution, it was evident that curriculum and required courses varied. Programs were academically located in College of Education departments, School of Health Sciences, and Student Development. The inconsistent infrastructure seemed to negatively impact one student's experience in her graduate program. She explained this when she said:

ANN: How do I put this delicately...there was no structure with specific classes that were required to take in a certain order...and to hear from faculty because there were classes in the college of education, student development administration program, counseling programs, and the adult education learning program...it became really confusing...it also would have been better suited to take classes in a structured order such as education research in the first year or a social justice class because those are really important for our program...because of the mission of the institution...but I am just taking my social justice class this quarter and it is my last year.

Ashley Jo also offered a unique perspective when she explained her experience:

ASHLEY JO: Program courses are challenging when you work full time because a lot of the courses are offered in the middle of the day...so I think that presents a

challenge for some of the students who are working full-time...the mandatory classes are a little different at HU...the overall school is in special education so we have several counseling classes...but the program is set up to streamline you directly into a Ph.D. program...so we are not required to take Higher Education law or finances because they are offered in the Ph.D. track...from what I have heard from faculty, these are the most important classes needed in student affairs and yet we don't take them unless we go into their Ph.D. program.

Other participants contributed their experiences relating to when the courses were offered. One participant shared her satisfaction with how the structure of the program was:

ANNIE: Our program is... well your first year, you know your classes are set from 6-9pm and your second year, they are mostly from 3-6pm. There is not a lot of flexibility with that, its pretty much just those times. I think it works pretty well. I almost wish it was flipped and that our classes (second years) were from 6-9m and not 3-6pm because having classes during the day, during the times where I can be in my office working is taking time away from things I can be doing in my internship or assistantship. It would be easier for me to take night classes instead of afternoon classes.

Shawna continued the praise of positive characteristics of her program:

SHAWNA: The program is well thought out regarding required courses...the classes are also offered at a time that work for me within my assistantship. If could change anything, it would be to separate our research course into two different sections; research in higher education and assessment.

Although the curriculum and course evaluation varied across participants, one unanticipated finding was the participant's agreement that courses seemed to be redundant. Marrion introduced this perspective when he said:

MARRION: I think they offer courses you need to be successful...from my perspective; I think they offer some redundant classes from my experience in the field. I think that, you know...I understand...you have to jump through the hoops they lay our for you, but it is kind of frustrating to some extent because they require us to take it...for me (as a person with experience) it is pretty redundant to go over. For the most part, yeah I think they are good courses.

Annie echoed Marrion's experience:

ANNIE: I understand the concept behind it, the need for it...most of the mandatory classes that we have are pretty beneficial for me...obviously we have our theories in higher ed course which is one of my favorites and then we have a couple of courses that are background to student affairs and I would say a few of them have gotten a bit redundant... I think one expands on the other and its like you are progressing through...I mean I have this information, it's a bit redundant but still beneficial.

Despite the participants coming from different universities and graduate programs, common experiences were shared across their journeys. Each participant expressed the critique of curriculum or the need to diversify courses to address student's areas of improvement and learning opportunities as a benefit to adult learners.

Professional Development

Professional development was highlighted in the mission and values by several of the host institutions in this study. Among the participants, professional development seemed to be of value to all members. Each participant explored their experience traveling to conferences locally, regionally, and nationally. In all aspects, these topics were discussed as things each of the participants had received or wish they had access to as a part of their graduate school experience.

During the interviews, the topic that was referred to most often was the desire for more financial support and opportunity to attend regional and national conferences. Shawna introduced the lack of time for professional development when she mentioned feeling unable to spend much time away from work and her family. She further explained her experience with professional development when she said:

SHAWNA: During my first year, I found it impossible to travel to conferences because I do have a family because I was still adjusting to the time constraints and the rigor of the program, the high demands of the program, and so I would look into conferences, but ummm...I was never able to go when they were offered. I felt like I could not get away from work or home. So I did not go...This year, I

feel that I have the pace more under control and I am able to get away for a day or a few days if it is close enough to home.

Norah shared a similar experience in her graduate program:

> NORAH: I have not be able to travel to conferences...that is one thing that I wish I could do more but I umm...always...all of the conferences I go to are for my work first and foremost and I really...that is one thing I feel like I may have lost out on. I definitely have not had the whole grad school experience...like for example, one of my coworkers decided to quit her job and just go be a graduate assistant for a few years and I was so envious of her that she was able to do that because...that is one thing that I have missed out on...you know this is all secondary...oh I have my career I have to maintain first and so I don't have the opportunity to say "oh, I am going to go to (Insert blank conference name here)" or just for the hell of it because I am a grad student...I am like..."oh God", now I have to do my job and then maybe I'll have time to do one little thing if its on campus.

Shawna and Norma really struggled with time management and the ability to balance their professional and family life from their graduate experience. Marrion's experience also aligned with Shawna and Norma when he mentioned, "Unfortunately, I have not been to many conferences unless it is on behalf of my job. I hope that counts towards my degree in this program". Annie introduced her perspective with traveling to conferences as a graduate student and brought attention to funding:

> ANNIE: We don't actually have more for us specifically...I don't come in with a budget for professional development, we have to go through and allocated for it and that process is a little convoluted and complicated at times because there are multiple ways we can seek funding...then there are also other student orgs that we can go through...so it's a bit complicating to go through those...if you get money from one, you cannot go through another...Financially, it has been a little bit challenging because there are a lot of areas where things fall through the cracks and you have to pay for things on your own...that was the case for me last year. I had a conference...a regional conference where I had to pay for everything by myself, which is fine it wasn't a huge chunk of money, but still a good chunk...I had to cover that myself...However, I do I feel like the act of going to a conference is very supported by our staff and faculty.

Similarly, Ashley Jo discusses her lack of traveling to conferences due to the high cost associated with traveling:

> ASHLEY JO: I have traveled to a couple of conferences but because there isn't a lot of funding, it can be expensive. I wanted to go to NASPA this year buy my personal budget doesn't allow for that and because I am not presenting, travel funds are not readily available to borrow or to get from the school but I have gone to a few regional conferences. I have also presented a little too. I am presenting at a conference in Indianapolis in January. It is a hit or miss but the opportunities have been mostly regional...just because of the savings.

Ann's experience was not like the other participants in the study. She highlighted traveling to conferences regionally and nationally but went further in depth to describe her experience while being at these conferences. She mentioned the perception that student affair conferences are 'cliquey':

> ANN: I attended a national conference a couple year s back...that was really overwhelming to me. I have gone to national conferences, regional conferences but student affairs conferences are 'cliquey' and are focused on what region you are from, what school did you go to, what school do you work at, and then you have to find your niche, you find your group...anyways, after visiting my region...they asked you to introduce yourself as a grad student...they are really excited about what your next plans are, what area do you want to work in, where do you want to be, etc. Yeah I have to acknowledge that I am not your typical student affairs graduate student. I am not ready to be mobile. I am not going into housing. They ask if I am going to TPE, I have to tell them "no, I am not, I'll be staying in the area I am in now because my husband is there and this is where we are located."...I believe they think all grad students are just ready to go wherever the job opportunity may take us but that is not the case.

Dialogue with participants revealed funding and time management as major barriers to professional development.. It might be considered that due to the program construct, supporting students financially to travel to conferences for professional development may not be valued. However, Ann's experience of identifying cliques formed within the profession was unanticipated. It would be interesting if this were to surface among other participants or in future studies.

Relationships

When students have positive relationships with faculty and staff, they are more likely to

succeed (Flint, 2005). Participants in this study mentioned the need to manipulate their

own identities to prepare for relationships with faculty/staff as teachers in the classroom.

During the interviews, participants discussed their role and interactions on campus with

faculty, staff, and their peers. Some participants shared the experience of feeling valued

on campus, while others encountered negativity from their less experienced classmates.

The relationship theme is divided into two subthemes: Experiences with Faculty/Staff

and experiences with peers.

       Experience with Faculty/Staff. The relationships between Faculty/Staff and

participants were generally perceived positively. Statements such as "I feel very

respected by program faculty" and "staff are invested in our future" were common among

participants. Annie discussed her perception of how graduate students are treated by

faculty on her campus:

> ANNIE: I think they are very inclusive of us and really want us to have an active
> role in what is happening so we can see all of the facets of students affairs...so we
> can see what we do, what higher ups do, some of the behind the scene things, etc.
> The system they have set up makes sense and is inclusive.

Norah mentions similar traits found in faculty/staff on her campus:

> NORAH: Many offices on my campus choose to participate in hosting students
> for practicum. They seek out opportunities in which graduate students can help
> and they can interact with them. They believe grad students are competent and
> worthy of mentoring and you know working within their unit.

Norah, Annie, and Shawna shared a very similar experience with faculty/staff. Marrion,

Ashley Jo, and Ann had different experiences than their peers in this study. For example,

Marrion introduced the idea of being perceived as someone who has limited work

experience.

MARRION: What I run into a lot is that they (Faculty/Staff) all assume because you are a graduate student in student affairs, you work in resident life, your whole life has been student affairs, that you know everything we do is students. I think I deal with a lot of assumption of how I show up...a 280 pound white guy with a shaved head...I am automatically categorized as an ex-biker.

Ashley Jo spoke to the development of her career and her identity as a professional when

she said:

> ASHLEY JO: I believe faculty/staff have the assumption that graduate students are still going through development themselves, a lot of times I hear things...because people don't realize that I am a student, I hear negative comments like "what do they know, they just got out of undergrad themselves...they are not capable" but we are fully capable.

Ann's negative experience was very similar to Marrion's in which they felt grouped into

the same category as all graduate students. For example, Ann said:

> ANN: I believe they think all graduate students are gullible and that we are just ready to just go wherever the job opportunities take us. I have brought this up during some mock interviews within the next week. I wish there was more time for authentic conversations with professionals. I don't think I ever got that type of time.

Each participant seemed to have a fairly positive experience when it came to faculty/staff

dynamics. Marrion, Ashley Jo, and Ann mentioned some negative experiences they

encountered or perceived by professionals on their campus. Their reflections highlight the

importance of acknowledging all identities and experiences of adult learners versus

placing all graduate students into one group.

Experiences with peers. Three students highlighted their experience and

relationships with their peers in the classroom. This was unanticipated as the researcher

only expected students to discuss their relationships with faculty and staff as supervisors

and in roles of authority. The perception seemed to be negative as participants mentioned

"misperception" and being perceived as not advancing as far in their career as their

younger counterparts. This theme is highlighted by the following three quotes:

> SHAWNA: I get a sense of people feel and assume...and they may be right in their assumption...they believe they will go further in their career than I will because started earlier...they basically went right from undergrad to grad school. We'll be starting out in the workforce, they will have 15 more years that I will to work professionally and I feel like people try not to say that, but sometimes they do. It is kind of insulting they believe that I am starting late and that I won't get as far.

> MARRION: I think during my first year of this program, there were students who felt that I didn't know much of what I was doing and I think that had a lot to do with how I presented myself. I did not have a lot of self-confidence in what I was doing. I was hurrying the job. I think there was a time a person assumed I didn't know what I was doing. How I handled that situation was if it had gotten to out of hand with those students, I would have called meeting and told them "you know, its okay to question why I do what I do but give me the opportunity to show you how I have come to the position I am in".

> ASHLEY JO: I think at first students assume I am like out of touch, like I don't know technology, which I do but because I am older, they think I am not current or hip or whatever it is...I do know how to work with smart boards you know!

In this theme, students explored their experiences with Faculty, Staff, and other

students. The experiences ranged among the participants but the majority expressed a

positive experience. Stories shared highlighted faculty going above and beyond in their

capacity and really encouraging students to grow within their own journey. These

experiences shifted when participants discussed relationships with their peers. During the

interviews, the perception of younger peers being competitive or passing judgment on the

ability of the adult learners returning to school seemed to be common. Overall, the

participants provided insight to relationship dynamics that could be further explored.

Costs associated with degree

The fifth and final theme that emerged from this study is the costs associated with each participant's master's program. The theme will be divided into two sub-themes: a) assistantships and b) out-of-pocket expense. Each participant mentioned these sub-themes during their interview.

Assistantships. The experiences of the participants varied in their assistantship roles. Shawna, Ashley Jo, Annie, and Ann all are employed through an assistantship in their graduate program. The experience varied between being positive and negative. Shawna expressed how "fortunate" she was to have such a rewarding opportunity:

> SHAWNA: I feel very fortunate to be in the program that I am in. My assistantship pays a stipend...umm not only is there tuition remission for being a graduate student...I don't have to deal with coming up with tuition. For me, I am head of my household for my family, so that makes my budget much tighter than some of my cohort member, but we're still okay on the stipend.

Annie continued the praise of her program and the benefits of her assistantship. She expressed the value of working in housing as the main benefit:

> ANNIE: I am definitely okay with the assistantship. It pays for pretty much everything for the students. I work in housing, so I obviously have my tuition paid for. I have an apartment that I get for free, I have a meal plan associated with that as well and I get a small stipend on top of all of that. The only thing I have to pay for is a book. For me, I would say the cost is great and there is not a problem for me.

After several interviews, the positive experience began to shift among the participants. Two participants mentioned the perception of false advertisement of their program related to the assistantship. Ann discussed this perception when she said:

> ANN: The program is advertised with regards to graduate assistantships. The graduate assistantship gives you a perceived notion that it pays for tuition, when it does not. It barely meets the baseline description...and then...you don't even get to have those conversations around living costs...I quite honestly wouldn't be able to be here if it wasn't for having a partner to share a living space with. I am certainly not bringing in the big bucks.

Ashley Jo's experience was very similar to Ann's. She mentioned the assistantship at her institution "does not pay" and that the only benefit is if it is "associated with housing". She further explains:

> ASHLEY JO: Stipends are pretty small, so the costs associated with the degree is pretty high because you either have to take out loans or pay out of pocket. Students are just racking up more and more loans, so its kind of a financial challenge. As I explore doctoral program, the first question I am asking is "what does your assistantship offer" because I know while I am in a position right now to pay out of pocket, this can't be sustained long term.

> **Out-of-pocket expense.** Norah and Marrion were the only two participants who

were funding their graduate tuition cost without financial assistance from outside sources. They both expressed their distaste for the financial burden they have taken on. Norah further elaborates:

> NORAH: The cost is more than I would prefer but it is definitely by far not the most expensive school. It is average, probably less than a lot of places...I mean student affairs probably wasn't the area to seek out if I was looking for a good payday...but hopefully it will eventually workout.

Marrion continues this theme and adds his fear and the implications of considering his family with this financial commitment:

> MARRION: I feel overwhelmed by the cost...I don't know if I will ever repay back the loans or if the debt was worth taking on. I have managed to do it without my wife's name on the loans and it's not transferable. So when I die, she is off the hook. I must be honest, that scared me more than anything. To take on that much debt, I feel like it is worth it, with the doors it will open and will allow me to pursue other jobs and career opportunities in other countries.

The impact of having a master's degree affected the student's decision to return to graduate school and to accumulate the possibility of debt. For the four participants--- Shawna, Ann, Annie, and Ashley Jo, some financial assistance was much better than none at all. As for Norah and Morrison, despite the high cost of the degree, they found it

necessary to absorb the cost to open other opportunities later in their professional careers. They both confessed "they hope it is will pay off in the long run".

Results Summary

This study explores the experiences of Master-level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Masters program. In six one-on-one semi-structured interviews, study participants elaborated on their graduate experience as non-traditional graduate students. Five themes emerged from the data collection: a) motivation for returning to graduate school; b) experience in academia; c) opportunity for professional development; d) relationships with faculty, staff, and peers; and e) cost associated with graduate school. These themes offer context to how participants have navigated their identity of being a professional in the field to returning to the classroom to improve their resumes. The results from the data analysis provide a brief snapshot for future graduate students and professionals in student affairs to know what their peers and students may be experiencing. The following chapter will address general conclusions, possible implications of these results, limitations of this study, recommendations for further research, and final concluding thoughts.

Chapter 5: Findings & Conclusion

Through this study, I have examined the experiences of self-identified Master level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Masters program. In chapter four, I explored themes that emerged from the data analysis. This final chapter will continue to build upon what the experiences are of self-identified Master level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Masters program. In addition, this chapter will provide (a) a discussion of the findings, (b) general conclusions based on the results of this study, (c) implications for practice in Student Affairs, and (d) the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

This study was executed through a qualitative approach, which included a sample size of six students. The students that participated did so voluntarily and with great enthusiasm. Participants seemed excited and eager to discuss their experiences in an interview setting. Some students were interested in why I chose this specific topic and a few others were curious on what I hoped to prove with this research. A couple of participants expressed their own interest in the topic and that they would encourage classmates and friends they knew to participate in the study.

General Findings

As I progressed through the process of data analysis, I was able to identify findings that connect and answer the research question: What are the experiences of self identified Master-level graduate students who have worked four or more years in higher education before enrolling into graduate school? By reviewing the literature, I was able to anticipate some of the findings, however, there were also some unanticipated findings.

Many of the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of this unique student population and provide a voice and content for discussion of implications, program development, and future research areas.

Anticipated Findings. When I began the process for conducting this study, I anticipated some of the themes that would surface based on the specialized population the research is catered towards. In this study, I examined the experiences of self-identified Master level students who worked in higher education for four or more years prior to enrolling into their Masters program. The two findings that I expected to surface through the analysis are related to the motivation to return to graduate school and their interactions/experience with faculty/staff in the classroom and on campus. The majority of the conversation within the interviews focused on their identity prior to graduate school, experiences adapting back to being a student on a college campus, and feedback on how their program can better meet their needs as adult learners.

The first anticipated finding was the participant's motivation to enroll in graduate school. Adult learners return to school for several reasons: qualify for career advancement, desire for career change, develop skills needed for employability, and to set a positive example for their children (White, 2011). Each participant's experience reflected the current research on motivation for returning to graduate school. The theme of motivation presented in the previous chapter provided an ample amount of examples of the participants' motivation to return to graduate school.

The second anticipated finding related to the adult learner's experience with curriculum and experiences in the classroom. One of the initial reasons I was drawn to this research problem was that I am an adult learner and my graduate cohort has several

adult learners with varying degrees of professional experience. This led to me wanting to

explore and research their experiences compared to my own. Therefore, I anticipated

finding that adult learners have varying experiences in the classroom and that they have

several opinions on curriculum. In a program that is made up of graduate students with

less than four years of professional experience, I speculated that there would be expressed

concern for how curriculum is delivered. For example, the following quote is the

response to the interview question relating to curriculum and experience in the classroom

(question eleven, Appendix).

> "...I expected more assistance in the classroom...but overall faculty are really
> good at engaging student...they don't just lecture at us...a lot of the time we are
> put into small groups to have discussions and give feedback...Finally, they offer
> feedback in a timely manner on assignments which is constructive and always
> helps students improve..." Ashley Jo.

Ashley Jo expressed some areas where she felt that she could receive an increase

in support, advocating for more one-on-one assistance in the classroom. Older adult

learners may have unique experiences adapting to the advancement of technology used in

the classroom. Other students highlighted their inability to learn in such chaotic and the

unclear expectations set in the classroom. It was articulated during an interview when

Ann said:

> "Faculty can really rely on you to speak up in the classroom...For example, I had
> not written a college paper in four or more years...so the expectation was that
> since I was older they would ask me to articulate more...my first quarter was the
> most difficult. There was a lot of challenges in my identity development...going
> through my whole identity from being a working professional to a student
> again...it was hard to connect with students who were fresh out of undergrad so I
> clung onto the older experienced students"

Many of the other participants acknowledged personal obstacles in the classroom that

they felt would help them to have a positive experience if they were changed, as reflected

on in chapter four. As I generated this research study, I did not emphasize the creation of a hypothesis of what findings would result from this study. Since this study was conducted through a phenomenology lens, I did not feel that it was appropriate to form a hypothesis as it may misconstrue how I interpreted the data. Although I was not expecting these specific examples, I did anticipate participants sharing stories about their experiences in the classroom and offering ways of how the experience can be improved from their personal lens.

Unanticipated Findings.

As I was able to anticipate some of the major findings in this study, I was unable to anticipate all of the ones that surfaced during data analysis. Several themes discussed in chapter four were not expected. The unanticipated findings range from one personal individual experience to a commonality among the participants that were not expected answers or results to the questions asked during the interview.

Professional Development opportunities. Each of the six participants interviewed disclosed they wish they had more financial support or opportunities for professional development from their institutions. Before this study, I had not considered the different institutional types or funding processes in higher education. Students confirmed not having access to any funding or the funding process being too complicated to navigate.

Relationships with Peers. Previously in chapter 4, I mentioned students' relationships with faculty/staff on their campus. I anticipated there being minor feedback in the participant's reflection. However, I was caught off-guard when four out of six participants mentioned conflicts and misunderstandings with their less professionally-

experienced program peers. The lack of understanding of why adult learners do not participate in out of classroom extracurricular activities and the competitive nature of job searching were credited to these perceptions.

Costs associated with degree program. Though several of the participants mentioned having financial support through assistantships, the majority of participants discussed the overwhelming cost of the program and the misconception of what assistantships offer. There was a mutual feeling relating the cost of the degree program as too expensive by participants with no financial support from the institution. These students navigated the cost of their degree by absorbing a large amount of federal loans. Despite the uncertainty of the benefits of the degree, participants felt that the pros of having a degree outweighed the risk of going into debt.

Perception of whom the program is catered towards. Of all of the unanticipated findings, this was the most surprising. During the interviews, participants were directly asked whom did they feel their program was catered towards. I knew it would be addressed in the responses, however, I did not expect the answers provided by the participants. The participants acknowledged their perception of what age population their graduate program was catered towards. The responses ranged from 21-27 years of age and emphasized the populations as new professionals with little or no previous working experience before attending graduate school. This finding raised the question of are graduate programs tailoring the curriculum based on the needs of students or are they utilizing a "one size fits all" model?

General Conclusions

Based on the themes that emerged in chapter four and the anticipated and unanticipated findings, I am able to draw four conclusions to this study.

Background/Previous Experience. Adult learners background plays a significant role in how they navigate the world of education. For participants in this study, it was obvious and relative to the research question. The participants' identity as professionals informed how they learned in the classroom and in the profession; which validates the importance of the research question. As many programs are theory-to-practice based, this population is entering graduate school with practical experience and is picking up the formal theory as a secondary component. Within the themes in chapter four and unanticipated findings sections, the commonalities of adjusting to the learning environment, reverting back to a lecturing learning model, and finding time within a work schedule to complete homework and internships all reflect the students professional identity. Each of the six participants shared what their experiences were returning to graduate school and how it impacted how they showed up in their program.

The importance of a student's background was not the type of data I expected to receive when conducting interviews for this study. After multiple responses from the students kept referring to their professional past, I realized their professional identity impacts and informs their experiences in the classroom.

Desire to learn. The second conclusion focuses on the students' motivation for enrolling into graduate school and their desire to learn. Each student provided their primary reason for returning to graduate school and what they hoped to gain from the experience. It was evident that the overwhelming majority of the participants returned for

better job opportunities and to acquire skills they would need to receive job promotions. The decision to return was also connected to the hope of an improved job or competitive resume. The participants who returned to graduate school with aspirations of a job promotion knew that it would not be guaranteed, but instead took the approach that an advanced degree would open more doors and opportunities in different avenues of student affairs; this included transitioning between academia and student affairs. The students who returned to graduate school to continue the opportunity to learn in a structured setting expressed just wanting to gain knowledge to be competitive in the job market. Overall, all six participants mentioned a possible increase in pay was enough to motivate them to learn.

Significance of professional development. The final conclusion I drew from this study highlighted the importance placed on professional development. During the interviews, participants verbalized their desire to acquire more opportunities and skills that would benefit their professional identity. For participants in this study, professional development was something that was of high interest and value. Participants mentioned a wide range of desired opportunities from on campus trainings to the ability to travel to national conferences. The inability to travel to conferences due to family or work obligations made on-campus opportunities appealing.

Implications for practice

Various implications for practice can be considered in light of these findings. The findings of this study will contribute to the research surrounding self-identified adult learners who have worked four or more years in higher education before enrolling into a Master's graduate program. There has been minimal research on this topic or specific

population. With the growing number of adult learners enrolling in graduate school, it is paramount that universities and student affairs graduate programs know the demands and needs of their students. This study's primary focus was on adult learners in student affairs Master-level graduate programs and can inform work with that population.

An implication that surfaced from the four findings is that there may be a need to re-evaluate the structure of some student affairs graduate programs. The participants' comments related to course redundancy and the perception of what age population their graduate program is catered towards; this area should draw greater concern. Though the responsibility of choosing a graduate program falls on the adult learners, there are often other barriers that restrict them from attending a program that matches their life needs such as children, work, and/or spouses. More opportunities and resources need to be presented for adult learners to offer their knowledge and experiences to their peers and colleagues so they can continue to grow as professionals and help new professionals develop. Revisiting adult learning theory can help aid graduate programs in their support of adult learners.

A second major implication of this study is the need for more professional development opportunities. Each participant expressed their desire for more opportunities to develop professionally in student affairs. NASPA (2014) states "Supporting research and scholarship to add to the knowledge base of the profession and ensure that data informs practice" as a guiding principal. Though many initial thoughts may leap directly to regional and national conferences, professional development opportunities can stem from lunchtime learning series, hosting hour-long dialogues around students' topic of

choice, or more opportunities to connect with other professionals at neighboring institutions.

As graduate degree programs enrollment increases, it is imperative that the support and development of this unique population is considered. With more opportunities, these adult learners can impact not only their own development, but also younger professionals who will be the future of the profession. Offering different professional growth opportunities will provide the chance for adult learners to share their experiences and lessons learned throughout their career.

Student affairs professionals and faculty who interact with adult learners should be aware of the different needs of adult learners and how their participation can shift the learning of others. Within this study, the themes outlined in chapter four and the conclusions discussed in this chapter can be applied to inform future practices in student affairs.

Limitation of Study

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation was the amount of time available to complete the research and write a masters degree thesis. In order to conduct this research, I had to submit an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the beginning of my second year of graduate school. This research process and the completion of the thesis project were completed in year three of a three-year part-time graduate program. Time constraints and the snowball effect for research participation led to a small sample size for the study. With more time and a different approach to recruiting participants, more participants could have enrolled in this study and a larger comparison between adult learners may have been possible.

Another limitation of this study is the inability to generalize the findings. Several factors contributed to the inability to generalize the experiences of adult learners to all adult learners in master's student affairs graduate programs: The narrowed scope of the target population, the sample size that enrolled in the study, and varying experiences that led the participants to this point in their career. Six students participated in this study but it is unknown how many graduate students fit the criterion to enroll in the study in student affairs graduate programs. The six interviews provided an introduction of stories, examples, and demands that they experienced in their identity as returning master-level graduate students who have four or more years working in higher education before returning to graduate school, however, the supports do not include the entire target population.

The third limitation was finding accurate and supplemental literature related to this specific population. Due to this population not being researched heavily in the field, it was challenging locating articles and books relating to experiences of this population. It challenged me to have to narrow the scope of my literature review into specific aspects of adult learner experiences.

A fourth limitation of the study was coordinating interview time slots that matched with participants. I ran into many problems with several students interested in participating but not being able to find time to participate in the study do to finals and their academic schedule. There were also complications around the difference in time zones finding a respectable and proper time to conduct the interviews for both parties. I also had to reschedule or cancel three interviews as participants failed to show up for the

interview or had a conflict arise and could not find an accommodating time that allowed for overall data analysis to still be completed by the original timeline.

The last limitation was that this study focused on the current experience of students. Though it came up through the interviews, the primary focus was not placed on the participants past or future experiences. Examining all aspects of participant's lives would have offered a more holistic view of their student affairs graduate experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

To continue to support and engage adult learners in student affairs masters programs, further research and assessment is necessary. This study analyzed the experiences of self-identified master level students who have worked four or more years in higher education before enrolling into graduate school.

Narrow target population. The requirements to participate in this study were identified as: a) Over the age of 18, b) at least a second year in a student affairs master's program, and c) have four or more years of experience working in higher education. An area for additional research can include focusing solely on one traditional gender.

Within this study, I looked at the experiences adult learners had in their master-level graduate programs. With the increase in graduate school enrollment, the examination of experiences related to this population could provide specific program needs to improve admission rates. Examining specific populations' background and experiences can also be added to the larger body of knowledge. Results would support the basic needs and research demands focused on adult learners.

Length and type of research. In this study, the data collection included conducting one interview with each participant. The questions for the interviews were

predetermined and the interview was semi-structured. Each interview lasted between 27 minutes and 39 minutes. To provide additional data to support this study and future studies, I recommend a longer study that includes interviewing students multiple times throughout their graduate experience. By conducting multiple interviews, a holistic experience could be highlighted providing more meaning for the study.

Broaden target population. Another area for further research lies with broadening the target population to include doctoral candidates as participants. This study focused on the experience of master-level graduate students. Incorporating doctoral candidates would create a clearer picture of what the experiences are for all types of graduate students. By allowing doctoral candidates to participate, it may provide a deeper understanding of how adult learners transition back to being students as well as how their identity as a working professional is challenged.

Gauge the adult learners needs. Often, the first interaction adult learners have with prospective programs is through program chairs and faculty, current students, and academic advisors. This initial interaction is a great opportunity to gauge the needs of the adult learner and to find out what they are looking to get of their graduate program. Asking the right question can be very beneficial to the institution and the prospective student. A conversation that becomes personable and thoroughly examines the true connection and support a student will have at an institution can benefit enrollment and graduation rates.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of self-identified Master-level graduate students who worked in higher education for four or more years before enrolling into

graduate school. Information was gathered on this topic through six semi-structured interviews. Through the interviews, participants shared stories and examples regarding their experience as a master-level graduate student. It is my hope that this study will promote a more critical lens and further dialogue within the profession related to how they cater towards this population. As the student affairs profession continues to grow, the demands of the students will continue to surface. I hope the findings of this study offer insight and context for student affairs professionals and educators who influence graduate programs.

As student affairs graduate programs aim to increase their enrollment, acknowledging the needs of different populations may help aid recruitment as well as inform best practices. As educators and professionals within higher education, the work done helps students begin a lifetime journey of growth and self-exploration (NASPA, 2014). The findings of this study can be used as a resource to better understand the needs of adult learners and how to improve current services for this student population to promote optimum growth within the profession.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A.

Interview Questions

1. What year are you currently in your masters program?

2. What is your current enrollment status?

3. Why did you decide to pursue a Masters Degree?

4. Does the program match your expectations that you entered with?

5. What is your current employment status? (Does not include assistantship)

6. If yes, how many hours do you anticipate working a week?

7. Is your current job within student affairs?

8. What are your thoughts on the times required program classes were offered?

9. What are your thoughts regarding the mandatory courses required for the program of study?

10. Was the program flexible in meeting your needs?

11. Do you feel that faculty are respectful of your level of experience in student affairs?

12. How was your overall interaction with faculty members in the classroom?

13. How do you feel about the cost associated with your degree and the program of study?

14. What is your race/ethnicity?

15. At the time enrollment for your graduate program, what was your relationship status

16. At the time of your enrollment, did you have any dependents?

Appendix B

Eligibility Requirements

To participate in the study, the participant must meet all of the following criterion:

- Be over the age of 18

- Have completed four or more years working in higher education before enrolling in a Student Affairs Masters-level graduate program

- Participants must have completed at least one full-year of academic coursework in their current graduate program.

Appendix C.

OSU Oregon State University — **Elements of Verbal Consent**

Social, behavioral, and education based studies

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of master-level students after retuning to graduate school after working four or more years in the field of higher education.

Activities. The researcher is asking all participants to answer sixteen interview questions that will take no longer than forty-five minutes to complete. The researcher is collecting information about your experience as a returning master-level graduate student after four or more years working in higher education.

Time. The interview will take no more than forty-five minutes to complete

Risks. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study.

Benefits. This study has foreseeable benefits in understanding and knowledge around the returning adult learners in higher education programs and will be contribute to published literature.

Payment. There will be no payment for participation in this study

Confidentiality. In accordance with the regulations, the PI will securely store all study related documents and data for three years post study termination. Coded information will be kept on a password-protected external hard drive in a locked safe at the principal investigator's university

office to ensure secure storage. Data will remain on said device for a minimum of three years. No direct identifiers will be stored after finishing interviews. No outside researchers will be privy to the identifiers used to code participants. .

During the research process, the first and last name as well as the email addresses of interview participants will be stored separately from the records of the interview sessions. The audio recordings and text documents collected from the interview will be kept in a password-protected file, accessible only to the researchers. Participants' identifiable information will be kept in a separate password protected electronic document with a coded filename.

The researchers will not open any email accounts, or data files on any public computers. Only private password-protected computers and/or OSU computers with authenticated password logins will be used to access any materials related to this study.

Participants will be informed that a professional transcriber may be hired to transcribe interviews. They will be informed that the professional transcriber may hear the audio-recorded interviews. The professional transcriber will not have access to identifying information of the participants other than their recorded interview and self-selected pseudonyms.

The researcher will transcribe the audio recordings in a private room using headphones. During the transcription, the researcher will use participants' pseudonyms to ensure

confidentiality. The researcher will use his laptop to transcribe the audio files to Word document files. The transcribed files will be password-protected. Only the principle investigator and student research will have access to the password.

Voluntariness. Consent to participate must be given freely. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate or for leaving the study at any time. You are asking for their permission to use the information you gather about them in the ways you intend. They can request that any identifying information about them be destroyed. They know they are free to remain silent on any topic.

Contact information. My contact information is Nettlest@onid.oregonstate.edu and the Private Investigator can be reached at LarryRoper@oregonstate.edu and the Institution Review Board at IRB@OregonState.edu

Sponsor. There is no sponsor for this study.

Appendix D

RESEARCH PROTOCOL
October 06, 2014

1. Protocol Title: The Experiences of master-level students who have returned to graduate school after four or more years of working in Higher Education.

PERSONNEL

2. Principal Investigator   Dr. Larry Roper

3. Student Researcher(s)   Trenton A. Nettles

4. Investigator Qualifications

    Dr. Larry Roper served as Vice Provost for Student Affairs and holds a PhD in higher education administration and has published prolifically on student affairs and student development in higher education.

5. Training and Oversight

    Dr. Roper and Mr. Nettles will meet regularly to discuss research, establish research and analysis benchmarks, and make revisions in preparation for thesis defense. Mr. Nettles will draw on expertise garnered from coursework on research methods and assessment, and on-going research for the Office of the Dean of Student Life.

FUNDING

6. Sources of Support for this project (unfunded, pending, or awarded)

    Unfunded

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

7. Description of Research

    The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of master-level students after retuning to graduate school after working four or more years in the field of higher education.
    This qualitative research is informed by interpretive/constructivist as well as critical social science epistemology with the intention to understand themes that emerge from student experiences. The research will capture the subjective perceptions of the participants individually. Individual interviews will explore personal stories and backgrounds, allowing the students to express their independent perspectives. The data will be analyzed through the interpretations of the researcher while comparing the emerging themes to Speck (1996) adult learning theory.

8. Background Justification

    In the last decade, there has been an increasing cost, declining appropriations and endowments, and competition in higher education (Mertz, Eckman, and Strayhorn, 2012). With much attention given to undergraduate students as they prepare for college, the same amount of attention has not been giving to graduate students with over 2.2 million students enrolled in 2007 (Mertz, Eckman, and Strayhorn).

    There are many reasons why individuals choose to pursue an advanced degree. For adult learners, Grube et al 2005) found that the main reasons adult learners return to school is to increase their chance for promotion, an increase in pay, and to compete with the influx of students entering the work field with advanced degrees. However, little attention is given to how to interact and work with adult learners in the classroom. When surveyed about their experience with being enrolled in graduate school after some time in the working world, participants expressed concerns with fitting in the classroom, faculty/staff/administration relationships and how they were perceived by these members, and the relevance of the materials being taught.

    However, there is not much research on the experience of adult learners in student affairs preparation programs. Student affairs has been classified as a "hidden profession" in which those who enter can have varying age and experience (Mertz, Eckman, and Strayhorn, 2012)

    This study will provide the opportunity to hear from Adult Learners and their personal experiences in the classroom and involvement within their student affairs preparation programs.

9. Subject Population

    - A description of participant characteristics: Participants in this will need to meet the following criteria:

        o Enrolled in a Masters-level student affairs graduate preparation program

        o Completed at least one year of graduate school work

        o Previously worked four or more years in higher education before returning to graduate school

    - Total target enrollment number: 30

    - Description of any vulnerable population(s): Pregnant women are eligible to enroll in this study.

    - Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

    - Included

        o Enrolled in a Masters-level student affairs preparation program

        o Completed at least one year of graduate school work

        o Previously worked four or more years in higher education before returning to graduate school

- - Pregnant Women

  - OSU Students and Employees

  - American Indians and/or Alaska Natives

- Excluded

  - Adults lacking capacity to consent

  - Children in foster care or wards of the state

  - Prisoners

  - Non-English Speakers

- Recruitment: Recruitment will be gathered using the snowball sampling method. The snowball will start in the current areas

  - Oregon State University CSSA Cohort 2012 Facebook Group

  - Oregon State University CSSA Cohort 2013 Facebook Group

  - National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Graduate Student Knowledge Community

  - National Orientation Directors Association Graduate School Network

  - Association of College Personnel Administrator Graduate Network

Prior to posting and/or distribution, the IRB must approve the final content of any and all advertisements and recruitment materials for studies that are conducted under the purview of the IRB. This includes but is not limited to recruitment via flyers, telephone, SONA, email, social media, and internet. **The final content of these recruitment materials should be submitted to the IRB with the initial application or project revision prior to their use.**

10. Consent Process

- **Describe where and when consent will be obtained.** Consent will be obtained after the initial contact email has been received from participants indicating that they are interested in participating in this study. Consent will take place at the beginning of the interviews before any questions will be asked.

- **Obtaining consent online.** Participants will have the option at the beginning of the interview to verbally express their concerns or comments as well as the opportunity to type out any questions or concerns during the interview process.

- **Assessment of comprehension.** Upon completion of requesting consent, the researcher will ask the following questions:

  - What questions can I answer for you?

  - So that I am sure that you understand what the study involves, would you please tell me what you think we are asking you to do?

  - Do you agree to participate in this study?

- **Significant new findings:** At anytime during the interview process, participants can choose to withdraw from the interview. Upon that request, the participant will be informed that any information they provided will not be used in the published study.

11. Eligibility Screening

- Initial eligibility qualifications will be addressed within the email invitation calling for participants. Participants will be provided with the eligibility criteria and asked to confirm that they are still interested in participating in this study. If they meet the qualifications, researcher will request a verbal agreement and read the verbal agreement statement before the interview questions take place.

- All participants will be required to participate in a personal interview.

- In case the participants do not qualify, all the information obtained (paper and electronic forms) will be immediately deleted. The paper forms will be disposed appropriately through shredding and confidential disposal containers at OSU. Any electronic forms will be deleted permanently from the student researcher's computer.

- Prior to the screening questions, the researcher will explain to the participants the purpose of the study as well as the methods of interview and focus group. They will be informed that they will be audio and video recorded and hand-written notes will be taken during the interviews. They will also be informed that the interview will likely last no more than 45 minutes.

12. Methods and Procedures

- This is a phenomenological qualitative study (Merriam, 1998) exploring the experiences of master-level graduate students returning to graduate school after working four or more years in higher education. A phenomenological study "describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). A qualitative method will be used in order to have individual interviews. Qualitative methodology was chosen because it provides a broad perspective and establishes rapport with participants as well as it allows the opportunity for each participant to share their store. Interviews allow the researcher to ask questions related to the experiences of individuals that investigate an "in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2005; McCawley, 2009). The researcher will use qualitative phenomenological methods because it provides the participants the opportunity to share their lived experiences as an approach to validate their inner-knowledge and for the researcher to understand the participants and engage in further research

(Rendón, 1995; Yosso, 2006).

- *Data Collection*
  - Participants in this study will consist of graduate students in enrolled in Student Affairs preparation programs across the United States.
  - An email will be sent to the following groups:
    - Oregon State University CSSA 2012 Cohort
    - Oregon State University CSSA 2013 Cohort
    - National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Graduate Student Listserv
    - Association of College Personnel Administrators Graduate Student Listserv
    - National Orientation Directors Association Graduate Student Listserv.
  - The email will list out criteria for the study as well as the contact information of the PI and the student researcher to contact if clarification needs to be provided or is they would like to participate. No more than the first thirty qualifying students interested in participating in the study will be chosen to participate in audio recorder interviews that will likely last no more than an hour. After obtaining verbal informed consent and ensuring eligibility, the student researcher will employ an in-depth, semi-structured one on one interview to explore the students experience as an adult learner returning to graduate school after four or more years working in higher education. The interview will be structured around seventeen predetermined open-ended questions. The participant is free to skip any questions that he/she would prefer not to answer. Related follow-up questions may be asked during the interview depending on a participants answer to each question.
  - Participant interviews will take place in over Skype while the researcher is in an isolated room wearing headphones. The door will be closed with an "occupied" sign on the door so as to not be disturbed.
- *Data Analysis*
  - Following the interviews, either the student researcher or a professional transcriber will transcribe the recorded interviews. To ensure validity of taped transcriptions, the researcher will offer member checking as a possibility should participants desire review of their answers.

o Using the interview transcripts, the researcher will hand code the data using a data analysis procedure as outlined by Creswell (2008). This procedure includes: reading through the text data; dividing the text into segments of information; labeling the segments of information with codes; reducing any overlap or redundancy within these codes; and finally, collapsing codes into themes (p. 251). The process will also be influenced and guided by Kvale's (1996) work on meaning condensation and categorization of qualitative data.

o To aid in analysis of the found codes and themes, the researcher will draw upon past and current literature as well as adult learning theory. Following the suggestion of Merriam (1998), in order to represent and "understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, " (p. 203) the researcher will include a section detailing his personal interests as a researcher, including his theoretical and professional orientation and possible personal biases that may affect data collection and coding.

13. Anonymity or Confidentiality

In accordance with the regulations, the PI will securely store all study related documents and data for seven years post study termination. Coded information will be kept on a password-protected external hard drive in a locked safe at the principal investigator's university office to ensure secure storage. Data will remain on said device for a minimum of seven years. No direct identifiers will be stored after finishing interviews. No outside researchers will be privy to the identifiers used to code participants. .

During the research process, the first and last name as well as the email addresses of interview participants will be stored separately from the records of the interview sessions. The audio recordings and text documents collected from the interview will be kept in a password-protected file, accessible only to the researchers. Participants' identifiable information will be kept in a separate password protected electronic document with a coded filename.

The researchers will not open any email accounts, or data files on any public computers. Only private password-protected computers and/or OSU computers with authenticated password logins will be used to access any materials related to this study.

Participants will be informed that a professional transcriber may be hired to transcribe interviews. They will be informed that the professional transcriber may hear the audio-recorded interviews. The professional transcriber will not have access to identifying information of the participants other than their recorded interview and self-selected pseudonyms.

The researcher will transcribe the audio recordings in a private room using headphones. During the transcription, the researcher will use participants'

pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The researcher will use his laptop to transcribe the audio files to Word document files. The transcribed files will be password-protected. Only the principle investigator and student research will have access to the password.

14. Risks

- The foreseeable probability of harm or injury (physical, psychological, social, or economic) occurring because of participation in a research study is minimal. The risks are minimal for participants because they are also able to opt out at any time in the study. The time that is involved in the interview portion of the study is also restricted to 30 minutes max. Furthermore, to reduce psychological harm, a constructivist approach will be taken, meaning that multiple truths may exist in the world and students will not be judged negatively based on their responses. The individual stories of students are important for this work. Potential risks, though low, may include emotional reactions with regard to participants reflecting upon their personal opinions and beliefs about spirituality.

- Since participants may be students at Oregon State University, there is a risk that they could be identified based upon their interview responses. To minimize this risk, pseudonyms will be used during the study.

- The researcher is using email to communicate with participants in this study. There is a risk that the security and confidentiality of information sent by email cannot be guaranteed. Information sent by email can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or contain viruses. To minimize these risks, the researchers will not open any email accounts, or data files on any public computers. Only private password-protected computers and/or OSU computers with authenticated password logins will be used to access any materials related to this study. This study will not collect any private information via email. Email will only be used for scheduling interviews/focus groups.

15. Benefits

- The benefits of this research will fill a gap in the existing literature for qualitative research of how universities approach educating returning master-level graduate students or Adult Learners. This study could give professionals a framework for how to support adult learning in higher education programs.

- This study is not designed to benefit participants directly. This study has foreseeable benefits in understanding and knowledge about returning master-level students.

16. Assessment of Risk: Benefit ratio

- The foreseeable probability of harm or injury (physical, psychological, social, or economic) occurring as a result of participation in a research study is minimal. The risks are minimal for participants because they are also able to opt out at any time in the study. The time that is involved in the interview portion of the study is also restricted to 30 minutes max. Furthermore, to reduce psychological harm, a constructivist approach will be taken, meaning that multiple truths may exist in the world and students will not be judged negatively based on their responses. The individual stories of students are important for this work.

- This study has foreseeable benefits in understanding and knowledge around the returning adult learners in higher education programs and will be contribute to published literature.

- The benefits outweigh the risks within this study.